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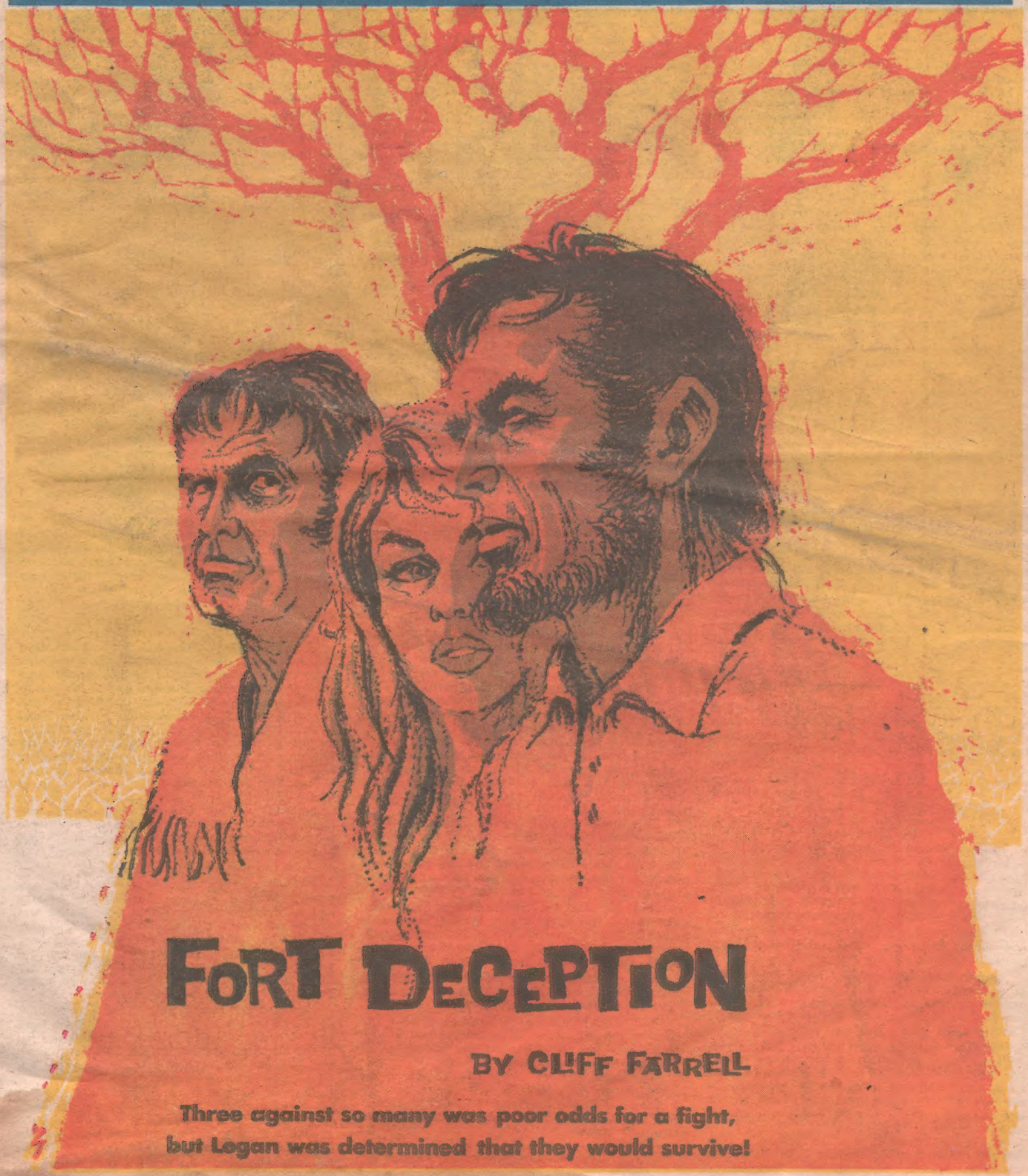
STAR WEEKLY NOVEL



FORT DECEPTION

BY CLIFF FARRELL

Three against so many was poor odds for a fight, but Logan was determined that they would survive!

FORT DECEPTION

Illustration by Gerry Sevier

INDIAN summer was fading in the upper Missouri river country, and Zack Logan felt the threat of winter in the sharp wind that whipped the drab surface of the stream. He shivered a little as he crouched in the brush, watching a keelboat which had appeared around a bend below.

The craft was being cordelled up-river along the near shore. The long tow line extended from its stubby mast to a score of voyageurs who struggled over rocks and through brush and mud, dragging the sluggish weight against the current.

Aboard the keelboat would be weapons and food. Also clothing and blankets. It was nearly a week since Quinn Spain, the bourgeois, or agent, at Fort Jeanne, had turned Zack afoot and weaponless and without provisions to make his way as best he could across the plains. His only garb was the worn buckskin hunting shirt and breeches and moccasins he was wearing.

Aboard the keelboat also, if Zack's information was correct, would be J. K. Fitzhugh. The raw welts a whip had branded on Zack's back seemed to flame anew into searing pain. His fists knotted into tight weapons at the very thought of facing this J. K. Fitzhugh, grand patron of Fitzhugh Fur, in whose name he had been captured, imprisoned and beaten with a lash, and a small fortune in furs seized from him.

As the keelboat approached, he retreated to a safer vantage point back of the rim of a high cut-bank and lay flat among the low fringe of brush. The cordelling crew came abreast almost below him. They were brawny, noisy, lusty men whose biggest pride was in their physical strength and whose hatred was the tow line to which they were enslaved.

They struggled past. The boat itself came closer and Zack found an opening through which to peer. A bandy-legged, heavy-stomached man handled the sweep that served as a rudder. Zack recognized him from the past. He was a Fitzhugh Fur keelboat captain known as Doughbelly Biggle. A hunter in buckskins sat cleaning a rifle. The cook was busy on the afterdeck, butchering a buffalo which the hunter evidently had recently bagged.

Zack stared in surprise as a young woman appeared from the deckhouse. A white woman, here on the upper Missouri! He had never heard of such a thing. She was comely, with tawny hair. She wore a calico dress, but it had been designed by someone of skill in enhancing the grace of the feminine figure.

She averted her eyes from the cook's task. The captain glared at that individual. "Cover up them things, Pierre!" he bawled. "Miss Fitzhugh don't hanker for the sight of blood an' such-like!"

Miss Fitzhugh! Zack stared. It had not occurred to him that J. K. Fitzhugh might be accompanied by feminine kin. He could now make out the name painted on the keelboat:

Jeanne Kathryn Fitzhugh
St. Louis, Mo.

Another woman appeared. She seemed to be in her late forties, although her golden hair could have belonged to one much younger. She was full-figured and wore a dress with many ruffles. She produced a snuffbox, helped herself to a graceful pinch and sneezed in an aristocratic manner.

"I don't understand why you've taken up that nasty habit, Aunt Sera," the younger one complained. "You're just showing off."

"My dear, Jeanne, sneezing is my only source of excitement in this forsaken land," the large woman spoke in a grand, cultivated voice. "Did you ever see such a place? Flat as the only cake I ever tried to bake. Not even an echo."

She threw back her head and sang a trill. Her soprano voice was rich, powerful, and more genuinely golden than her hair. She cupped a hand to an ear. "All that comes back," she said, "is the odor of perspiration from our friends on the tow line. An all-too familiar companion of our journey, my dear niece."

She had addressed the niece as "Jeanne." That was also the name of the keelboat. And then there was Fort Jeanne. Evidently this tawny-haired person was a figure of considerable importance.

Zack hoped that J. K. Fitzhugh himself would appear. He wondered what sort of person the grand patron would turn out to be. To the best of his knowledge, no person in the mountains had ever laid eyes on the present head of Fitzhugh Fur. This would be the fourth grand patron of that name. Fitzhugh Fur had been founded before the Revolutionary war. The company still maintained its headquarters in New York city, even though its furs were now gathered mainly in the Rocky Mountain country. J. K. Fitzhugh had become somewhat of a legendary figure, who was said to spend the most of his time abroad.

Zack's hope was not rewarded. The boat moved onward out of hearing. He followed, keeping it in sight. When early dusk came the craft was tied up and a gangplank run ashore. The voyageurs pitched camp on land for the night.

All of Zack's thoughts were occupied with visions of food.

He had drawn in his belt again during the day and had been shocked by the way his knuckles stood out on his hands. He was a stalwart six-footer with the breadth of shoulder and the litheness of leg of a man of endless endurance. For the first time in his life he realized he was nearing the end of his endurance. His black hair was long and shaggy, and the beard that filmed his jaws gave him a piratical aspect. His gray eyes had a sunken, feverish look.

He still had his flint and steel and prepared punk which hung in a brass watertight container around his neck where Spain's men had overlooked it in their search.

When darkness came he moved closer to the boatmen's camp. The fragrance of food being cooked came to him and he fought the desire to rush into the camp and seize it.

He forced himself to wait until the meal was finished and the camp was asleep. He crept along the margin of the river, wading to his waist at times in the chill water, until he reached the shadow of the water-slimed hull of the boat.

In the fading glow of the embers of the fires he could make out the blanket-wrapped forms of the voyageurs spread out on the shore. There seemed to be no guard on duty. This was friendly country for Fitzhugh Fur and their partisans. This area of the plains for another 100 miles or more until one entered the country of the Rees, was the hunting ground of the powerful Mandans whose towns stood north of the river. In the early days the Mandans had been cordial to all trappers, but since Quinn Spain had been made agent at Fort Jeanne the Mandans had allied themselves only with Fitzhugh Fur, and had been hostile to all other companies.

Zack pulled himself quickly aboard the keelboat and crouched in the shadow of the catwalk. He could hear the breathing of three sleepers aft. He crept there. Three men lay on robes and blankets. The captain and his mate, no doubt, having turned their quarters over to their guests.

Zack identified the third sleeper as the hunter. The man's rifle stood leaning nearby, along with a belt carrying a powderhorn and shot pouch. Zack crept to the hunter's side. He managed to appropriate the belt in silence. He reached for the rifle.

Back of him a feminine voice spoke, shrill with fright. "Don't touch it! Don't move! Two of us have fowling pieces trained on you!"

The tawny-haired Jeanne Fitzhugh stood in the door of the deckhouse, a cocked shotgun in her hands. At her shoulder was the golden-haired woman, also with a weapon.

The three sleepers awakened and leaped on Zack, pinning his arms. "I told you I saw an Indian watching this boat from shore today!" Jeanne Fitzhugh chattered. "If I hadn't stayed awake he'd have scalped all of us."

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A lighted candle was brought. Captain Biggle inspected Zack. "Ho! Well, I'll be swabbed! No, Miss Fitzhugh, this ain't an Injun. This one is even worse. His name is Zack Logan. I reckon you've heard of the Logan brothers who tried to start fur tradin' in the mountains three, four years back an' went bust."

The girl stared. "Is that true?"

"It seems that you have heard of the Logans," Zack said.

It was the large woman who answered. "We've heard nothing good. A pair of rascals who went into the mountains with a band of ruffians to rob and steal from honest trading companies."

Zack smiled grimly. "You're evidently one of them. A Fitzhugh. I heard this other one address you as her aunt. You've learned your lesson well. Who taught you how to speak your piece? Was it Quinn Spain, your bourgeois at Fort Jeanne? Or your double-dealing general manager, Paul Chalfant? More likely it was the grand patron himself. J. K. Fitzhugh."

Biggle pushed him roughly back. "Now don't be givin' the ladies any of your impudence! One more bit of it an' I'll lay the cat on your back to teach you manners."

Again Zack smiled bitterly. "You're a little late, Biggle. Spain and Chalfant have already tried that form of medicine. It didn't cure me of the contempt I have for Fitzhugh Fur and everyone connected with it."

"Are you trying to say you were punished with a whip?" Jeanne Fitzhugh demanded.

For answer, Zack wrested free of restraining hands and pulled off his hunting shirt. The girl and the others stared, shocked, at the marks on his back.

"When—when did this happen?" she asked shakily. "Where?"

"At Fort Jeanne," Zack said. "Five days ago. Five years. Five centuries. It happened. What difference? They might have hung me, except that they didn't dare go that far with Angus Macleod lying in his coffin in the fort, and all the engages mourning and praying for his soul."

"Angus Macleod?" Jeanne Fitzhugh cried. "The missionary? You knew him? Do you mean he is dead?"

Zack nodded. "I knew him well, as did most mountain men. He was with me the day Quinn Spain and his men found us camped up the river and seized me. Angus Macleod was on his way to Fort Jeanne to spend the winter there after a summer of preaching among the tribes in the Wind River country. By chance, he had encountered another old friend of mine, a trapper named Belzey Williams, on the trail, and they were travelling together. Belzey was a Logan Brothers partisan. Still is. He was heading out of the mountain to winter with his wives' people. Belzey has two Crow wives. I had made arrangements to meet Belzey at that particular spot, having met some trappers upriver who knew his whereabouts. Angus Macleod's presence was a matter of chance."

"But you say Rev. Macleod is dead?"

"It was a stroke," Zack said. "His heart, evidently. Without warning. He had told me the reason he intended to winter at Fort Jeanne was that he and Paul Chalfant, who is at the fort, were friends from the time they were young men back east. Angus accompanied me when I was marched to the fort as a prisoner, accused of being a fur thief. He assured me that Chalfant was an honest man and would give me fair treatment."

Jeanne Fitzhugh nodded. "That is correct."

Zack's voice was icy. "He did not live to learn how he had misjudged Chalfant. Chalfant was not at the fort the night we arrived. He was away, visiting some Indian chief. Angus Macleod was found dead in his room the next morning. He had been struck down as he ate his breakfast. Without him there to oppose their high-handed ways, Spain and Paul Chalfant threw me in a dungeon for a day, held a mock trial and had me given a dozen lashes at the post."

"If Paul Chalfant did those things, then you

must have deserved them!" she exclaimed.

"In the same way my brother deserved to be murdered three years ago?" he asked harshly.

"Murdered? Your brother was lost in the river. Drowned! It was an accident!"

"You seem to know a lot about these things," Zack said. "My brother was sleeping aboard a keelboat that was cut adrift at night so that it was swept into a rapids and sank. Dan could not swim. Two other Logan furmen drowned too. It was no accident. The mooring lines were cut. It was murder. No man, even a good swimmer, could have come out of the rapids alive."

Jeanne Fitzhugh was ashen. "That can't be true."

"I wrung the truth out of a Fitzhugh voyageur who was there," Zack said. "I squeezed his throat until he talked. He named the man who cut the keelboat adrift. Jules Lebow, who is Quinn Spain's heel dog. It was Lebow who swung the whip on me a few days ago at the fort."

Her voice was thin. "Why did you steal aboard this boat tonight?"

"In search of food. To find a gun and powder and lead to replace my own after Spain and Chalfant set me afoot to starve or be scalped on the plains."

He added: "And to get my hands on the throat of J. K. Fitzhugh."

"You—you knew J. K. Fitzhugh was on this keelboat?" she asked.

"A runner brought word to Fort Jeanne that he was on his way while I was a prisoner there. Where is he? I intend to make him pay for a lot of things, including the sables Spain and Chalfant stole from me."

"Sables? You must be insane. Sables—here?"

"Sables from Siberia," Zack said. "I spent two years trading for them on the northwest coast. Sables the natives had found in wrecked Russian ships or acquired by trade with poachers and Russian pirates. Imperial matched sables that I brought over the mountains on cayuse horses and some on my own shoulders. I bought them with fishhooks, beads, guns and knives for which I went into debt in St. Louis and carried over the mountains more than two years ago. These things were worth more than sables to the tribes. In St. Louis the sables would have brought $20,000. That would have put Logan Brothers Fur back in business in the mountains in spite of J. K. Fitzhugh and men like Paul Chalfant and Quinn Spain and their cutthroats."

"You lie when you call Paul Chalfant a cutthroat," Jeanne Fitzhugh almost sobbed. "He is my uncle. He has been like a father to me. You lie when you accuse J. K. Fitzhugh of conniving in brutality and murder."

She moved close so that she was face to face with him. "I am J. K. Fitzhugh!" she said. "Jeanne Kathryn Fitzhugh. I am the fourth J. K. Fitzhugh."

She turned and fled into the cabin. Zack stood staring. The golden-haired woman broke the silence. "You're only a slippery scoundrel, if you want my opinion. Take him to Fort Jeanne with us, captain. Paul will give us the straight of this. Feed him. He looks starved."

"If he eats he works for it," Biggle declared. "I can use another man on the cordelle."

"As you wish," she said, turning away.

The mate and the hunter, whose name was Hank Gratt, chained Zack to a ringbolt. The cook brought cold meat and bannocks of which Zack made quick work.

He found himself facing the prospect of spending the night on the open deck in wet buckskins. However, the golden-haired woman appeared. She was more decorously clad and wrapped in a cloak. She brought mackinaw blankets, a buffalo robe and new, dry clothes from the supply chest. "My niece sent these," she said. "I doubt if you deserve such consideration."

"You sing real nice, ma'am," Zack said. "I heard you today."

"Thank you," she said. "That is praise from an unexpected quarter. I once had grand opera ambitions. I am Miss Seraphine Fitzhugh. I am Jeanne's aunt and also her guardian. If you were really punished as you say, by the order of J. K. Fitzhugh, then the responsibility is mine, not Jeanne's."

"If your niece is really J. K. Fitzhugh, then why has she been hiding out for so long?" Zack countered.

"She hasn't been hiding. Jeanne inherited the company when she was four years old. Her father was my brother. Both he and her mother, who was a Chalfant, were drowned in a shipwreck off the coast of France. I was named Jeanne's guardian."

"She says Paul Chalfant is her uncle," Zack remarked.

"He was her mother's brother. Paul has been general manager of Fitzhugh Fur for years. He and I did not think it good policy to let it be known in the mountains that the grand patron was a female. Therefore we maintained the illusion of a mysterious overlord. Jeanne is of age now and has decided it is high time she let everyone know the truth. But I was the one who signed all official papers in her name. I am the one to blame, if you have any real complaints, not she."

Sera Fitzhugh paused. "I don't know why I'm telling you this, except that I have an odd belief that I should do so. I am sure you would like to cut my throat as a reward."

"You're safe enough," Zack said. "I don't even use a whip on females, no matter how much they need it."

"I'm not so sure," Sera Fitzhugh sniffed. She gathered her cloak around her and retired into the cabin.

Zack donned the dry clothes, wrapped himself in the blanket and pretended to sleep. When he was sure Hank Gratt was slumbering he tested the shackle around his waist. It was unyielding. He finally gave up and fell into heavy sleep also.

A boot against his ribs awakened him at dawn. Captain Biggle was glaring down at him. "On your feet, you! Turn out!"

The keelboat was soon under way. Zack was given a pole and placed among the sinewy voyageurs whose bodies were hardened to the task. He took his position on the catwalk.

Biggle, at the helm, rumbled, "A bas les perches."

Zack, in unison with the others set the pole in the river bottom and walked muscles straining, pushing the sluggish craft upstream at the same pace at which they fought their way sternward.

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"Levez les perches!" Biggle intoned. Lifting the poles, they raced forward and poised for the next thrust. The process repeated itself, slow mile after slow mile. "A bas! Levez. A bas!, Levez!"

The channel narrowed and the current quickened. Poles could make no progress. The cordelle was broken out.

"You there!" Biggle shouted, pointing to Zack. "On the rope with you. An' don't let me ketch you shirkin'."

Jeanne Fitzhugh and her aunt came on deck as the crew went ashore. The younger woman ignored Zack, but Sera Fitzhugh watched as the cordelle tightened.

Zack, slipping in mud, fell full length. A brawny keeler next in line stepped in the middle of his back. Jeering amusement ran up and down the line of men. The keeler, who was known as Big Louie, said, "The mud, eet ees softer than the whip at this Fort Jeanne, oui?"

Zack swung a leg and caught Big Louis at the knees. Louie's feet skittered from beneath him, and he too sprawled in mud and shallow water. He surged to his feet as a roar of delight arose along the cordelle. He came at Zack, fists swinging.

Zack stepped inside Louis' ponderous arms and struck him with a right smash to the jaw, and a left to the belt. Louis reeled back with a grunt. Zack hit him on the jaw with another right, and Big Louis went down in the mud. He fell forward on his face into the water.

Zack dragged him out of the river. "Proceed," he said to the others. "The captain should have set sail. This one has wind enough even to drive the boat."

With a roar of approval the line of rough men bent their shoulders again to the task. Big Louie revived and scrambled to resume his place on the line. He bore no grudge. "You are very queek, my frien'," he told Zack. "You hit very, very hard."

They moved onward, drawing the keelboat with them. Zack fell again at times, as did the others. But now hands helped him to his feet, just as he helped others when they slipped.

Jeanne Fitzhugh sat on a bench in the lee of the cabin, a sewing basket beside her, her hands busy.

"Faster!" Doughbelly Biggle bellowed from his all-seeing place at the helm. "Faster, you weaklings. You there, Logan! Quit loafin', or you'll feel the bite of a rope end!"

Jeanne Fitzhugh arose abruptly, and went into the cabin. She did not reappear. At mid-afternoon favorable water and a following breeze ended the cordelling. Everyone came aboard and sail was set.

Jeanne Fitzhugh returned to the deck and resumed her sewing. Her glance never rested on Zack, but he felt that she was observing him. She resented him, resented the way he had entered her existence, jarred her complacency. He had brought doubt to her and uncertainty, shaken her belief in herself.

The wind died and Zack began treading the catwalk with the others, a pole against his shoulder.

"Abas! Levez! Abas! Levez!"

And so it went that day and the next. Cordelle or pole, with only occasional intervals when the sail took over the task. Zack watched constantly for a chance to escape.

His body was paying the price. Toughened as he was to the trail, the cordelling and poling involved unused muscles and sinews. He found himself keeping step to Biggle's tune only by great effort of will.

At midafternoon of the third day the westering sun dimmed and the river turned a leaden hue. "Faster!" Biggle bawled to the cordelling crew. "We're in fer a change of weather."

They camped that night on a sandbar with a wintry wind screaming across the plains. Zack sat near a blazing fire among the voyageurs. He was shackled once more, this time to a stout iron stake that had been driven in the shore.

Jeanne came ashore as he was eating. She came directly to where he sat. "Unlock him," she said to Hank Gratt. "I want to talk to him. Alone."

"He might try to run fer it," Gratt objected.

"Stand ready to shoot him if he does," she said.

Zack, released from the chain, finished his food, taking his time about it, knowing that this nettled her. He arose and followed her beyond earshot of the others.

"It has been decided that you are not to work with the crew any longer," she said abruptly.

"Now that's right kind," Zack said. "Was it Biggle's idea? Or yours?"

"Mine," she said tersely.

"I figured so," Zack said. "Even the conscience of a Fitzhugh has its limits. You don't feel easy riding like a lady aboard a boat drawn by a Logan against his will, now do you?"

"You may be right," she said, and Zack had to give her credit for being honest with herself. "One thing I know. I'm treating you with too much consideration. The captain is sure I am."

"I'll stay with the crew," Zack said. "The bitter truth is that I'm particular about the kind of company I keep."

"This I promise you," she said grimly. "I will walk on shore whenever you are on the cordelle, if it means I have to walk every step of the way to Fort Jeanne."

"You won't last a day," Zack said.

She turned angrily and headed for the gangplank of the boat. Zack walked back into the blaze of firelight.

Hank Gratt, the shackle in his hands, arose to chain him again. "Here, you . . ." Gratt began.

An arrow struck Gratt in the back, the sound harsh and rending. It pierced through him, the head bursting from his chest before Zack's eyes.

Zack heard other arrows pass, and some of them were finding targets. The crash of rifles beat over the camp, along with the screeching of Indians.

Warriors were racing out of the darkness. Men were dying around the fires. The first volley had wiped out a third of the voyageurs. Zack felt the tug of an arrow at his sleeve. The attackers were pouring into the camp, using hatchets and clubs. They were Mandans! The tribe that were allies of Fitzhugh Fur! And they overwhelmingly outnumbered the crew.

Zack raced for the keelboat, which was the only path of retreat open. Other survivors were fleeing in the same direction. Not all of them made it. Some fell, wounded or dying, into the margin of the river. One of these, Zack saw, was Big Louie.

Zack leaped over the catwalk and rolled to the deck. He landed bodily on Jeanne Fitzhugh who was crouching there.

Zack seized up a rifle which lay beside one of the dead voyageurs. An Indian reared above the combing, gaining a foothold on the catwalk, a bowstring taut, an arrow ready.

Zack lifted the rifle and pulled the trigger. The gun was empty. The arrow grazed his shoulder. He reversed the rifle, swinging it in an arc. The blow snapped the Mandan's arm before he could nock a second arrow to the string, and he fell back into the shallow water.

Zack swung at another head, and found his target, but felt the riflestock shatter. He tossed it aside. A rifle exploded above him. Captain Biggle was on the cabin roof and someone evidently was handing him loaded weapons. Other guns on the boat were in action. That halted the Mandans momentarily.

Zack seized Jeanne and raced with her to the far side of the deckhouse where she would be sheltered. He found Sera Fitzhugh there, along with other survivors.

A voyageur, an axe in hand, raced to the prow and severed the forward mooring line. He was killed by arrows before he could reach the stern line.

Zack ran on to the open aft deck, snatched up the axe and cut the stern line. Bullets and arrows bracketed him, but he reached the shelter of the deckhouse without being seriously hit, although a graze on his neck drew blood.

Doughbelly Biggle lay sprawled on the deckhouse, dead. He had been carrying a heavy hunting knife in a sheath, which Zack belted around his own waist.

The boat was free, drifting along the shore. The deck was littered with bodies, and the Mandans on land were driving arrows into these limp forms to make sure the voyageurs were dead.

The current was sluggish. The boat drifted in the shallows, crushing against willows, and threatening to go aground. The Mandans began hurling aboard flaming brands from the cookfires.

"We're on fire!" a man shouted.

The port deck was flaming. The wind was driving the blaze upon the deckhouse. The fire spread with wicked speed.

Jeanne Fitzhugh and her aunt were staying close at Zack's side. Jeanne touched his arm. "I know we will have to go into the river. I would thank you if you will look after Aunt Sera. I can swim."

"Both of you stay with me," Zack said.

The deckhouse burst into flame. The heat was scorching. The boat revolved slowly, end for end, a deadly manoeuvre for the besieged because it brought them into full view of the warriors.

"We'll have to make a run for it," Zack said. "The prow is still clear of fire. We'll cross it and jump into the water on the outstream side and hang on to the hull. We might drift out of range."

The boat's motion had quickened. It had been caught by the main current, and was being carried away from land.

The heat of the fire became unendurable. Zack seized the arms of the two women and they ran the gauntlet across the foredeck. Zack knew that his hair was singeing. He saw Jeanne's skirt begin to flame.

Bullets and arrows raged around them as they leaped overside into the dark river. They went deep. Zack fought and fought to rise with the two women. Sera had the presence of mind to offer no resistance to his efforts. Nevertheless, she was a helpless burden.

Jeanne seemed to be moving feebly as Zack kicked and wriggled, attempting to help them to the surface. His lungs were in agony and he would have started swallowing water in the next moment. Their heads emerged.

They floated, gasping. The blazing boat sheltered them from view of the Mandans. Sera's head rested on Zack's shoulder, his arm supporting her. She was limp, and he believed she might have drowned. But she stirred and began to breathe with choking effort.

Jeanne knew the rudiments of staying afloat. She laid a hand only lightly on Zack's shoulder for support. He found a fingertip hold on the planks of the boat's hull, as he fought for strength.

The craft continued its aimless revolving. Again they were brought into view of the shore, but smoke hung low over the water. Apparently they were unseen through this haze, for, while many shots were being fired, no bullets came close to them.

On the other hand, the blazing craft lighted the shore. Among the milling figures of the Mandans, Zack glimpsed a tall man who wore the white capote of a kind peculiar to Fitzhugh Fur partisans. A deep, angry voice carried above the howling of the Indians. Zack made out the words which were in English. "Find them! Find them, confound it!"

He sighted at least two more capote-clad men on shore. They were not Indians. He worked his way with the two women around the prow to the out-river side so that they were again hidden. A handful of other survivors were around them in the darkness. He could hear others attempting to swim away.

He became aware of the icy grip of the water and of his exhaustion. He drew Sera Fitzhugh closer. "Hang on!" he said insistently. "We've got a chance now. We're drifting out of their reach."

Jeanne Fitzhugh was breathing hard. There was an irregularity in that sound that aroused him. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

She did not answer. Her hand slid away from his shoulder. Her face sank beneath the water. Zack caught her by the hand and drew her back to the surface. Her head sagged.

Zack again heard that strident voice on shore, but this time it was speaking the Mandan tongue, although he knew it was a white man talking. He was certain it was a voice he had heard before.

An explosion shook the keelboat. Debris and a plume of smoke ballooned upward. The fire had reached the powder supply in the deckhouse.

A second and greater detonation came. Evidently the main store of powder in the shallow hold had been touched off. A fountain of flame rose high above them. Along with it went portions of the deck and cabin.

The keelboat was blown apart. Zack saw the black hull rolling ponderously down upon them. He managed to get a tighter grip on the two women as it pushed them beneath the surface. They scraped along the rough planking, driven by boiling cross-currents. A surge of water finally swept them to the surface, gasping and in the first stages of drowning.

A sizeable section of the hull came porpoising to the surface and floated bottomside up. Zack kicked his way to it with the two women. Sera clung to the hull with her own strength. Jeanne Fitzhugh seemed to be unconscious. Perhaps dead. Burning wreckage drifted near, and in that murky light Zack saw blood flowing from an injury that extended from her forehead into her soaked hair.

He lifted her head higher. His hand touched something. The head injury, which did not seem serious, was not the only wound Jeanne Fitzhugh had sustained. An arrow was embedded in her body just below the right breast.

Zack was sure now that he held in his arms a person who, if she was not already dead, was so close to the brink that there was little hope.

But he discovered she was still breathing.

Paddles were splashing water. The Mandans had manned canoes and were approaching to hunt down survivors. Other warriors on shore were building brush fires and lighting torches.

Zack saw that the current was now swinging them back toward the shore where this danger waited.

The stream's margin seemed to be thickly grown with brush. At least this was keeping the Mandans away from the water's edge. Zack's feet touched bottom. A torch glowed beyond the brush, and torches now were showing in canoes approaching on the river.

Carrying Jeanne Fitzhugh, he led the way through the shallowing water, crouching and moving very slowly to avoid sound. The Mandans searching the shore had moved on past and down the margin of the river.

Zack parted the willows which overhung the water. The branches were nearly bare of foliage, but so thickly grown that they had a passable screen back of which to lie, bodies half-immersed in water.

Presently Zack could hear the paddles coming toward them.

The splashing became louder. With shocking unexpectedness a man yelled in horror. The outcry came again and was cut off by a blow, as of a hatchet cleaving a skull. Zack heard the grunting, savage elation of victors. One of the keelboat men had been found and slain in the river. This was repeated a few minutes later as another voyageur was located and dispatched. No person who had been aboard the Jeanne Kathryn Fitzhugh was being taken alive.

Sera began to whimper in terror. Zack drew her against him with his free arm. "Steady," he murmured. "They haven't found us."

The canoes drifted away. The search went on for some time. Suddenly Zack drew a long sigh. The Mandans were returning upstream, both those afloat and the searchers on shore. Evidently the hunt was over.

The slap of paddles faded off into the distance and silence came. The glow of torches showed far upriver. That was where the massacre had started. Zack emerged from the brush and scouted the vicinity to make sure the Mandans had all left. When he returned, Jeanne was still breathing with such faint irregularity that he knew she could not survive much longer if she remained in the chill water.

He lifted her and waded downstream along the margin of the river, with Sera following. The black shape of a bluff loomed like a giant haystack against the night sky a short distance back from the river.

Bare rock offered a path of escape from the water which would leave no tracks. Zack said, "Here we go," and they left the river.

They followed the rock footing to the base of the bluff. The eminence proved to be a solitary outcrop which rose some 200 feet above the flats around.

He placed the girl's limp form in a crevice where she was sheltered from the chill wind. Her scalp injury still bled slowly, but this damage was minor compared to the other.

The flint and steel was still hanging around his neck in its brass container. The sheath knife he had taken from Captain Biggle's body was still in place.

"I'll find a place where we can build a fire that won't be visible upriver," he said.

He hurried off into the darkness. The south base of the bluff dwindled away into what seemed to be a brushy river bottom.

He crouched suddenly. The snuffling and movement of animals came from the darkness. Elk were scattered among the brush. They evidently used this place as a yard for nightly forage. He retreated slowly, silently. Stampeded animals might head upriver and be heard by the Mandans who would suspect the cause.

He left the brush and mounted the bluff itself. Though there were many crevices in its shattered and faulted flanks, he could locate none that seemed adequate as a hiding place.

The icy wind against his soaked garb was an enemy as much to be reckoned with now as the Mandans. Inaction was a peril. The bluff rose to a rounded knob that reminded him of a buzzard's head because of the way it glinted baldly in the starlight. He paused just short of the last six-foot ascent to this barren summit, for it seemed wasted effort to make that last lunge upward.

He started to turn back, but was startled as a sizeable bird rose a few yards from him, apparently emerging from the bare knob. It flew off into the windy darkness. It was a great horned owl by its appearance.

He vaulted to the surface of the knob. At eye-level it had the aspect of an unbroken area of weather-polished rock. It was larger in length and width than it had seemed from below. It was not unmarred. The knob was split almost its length by a fault. Peering, he found that it was floored with dust and debris. It was more than 10 feet deep at its most extreme point and shallower elsewhere. He descended into it, exploring it mainly by touch. At one point the wall was undercut for a few feet, forming a shallow alcove that would give some protection from the weather. The slit narrowed and tapered at its southern extremity, but elsewhere there was depth for hiding three persons, although the quarters would be cramped. The mat of rubble underfoot seemed dry, indicating that the rock beneath was fractured, letting rain drain off.

Zack descended the bluff with a rush. Carrying Jeanne, and with Sera struggling at his heels, he ascended to the knob and lowered his burden into the hiding place.

The walls shielded them from the wind.

He descended the bluff and returned with fuel from the dry swamp. He huddled over the fire for a moment, holding his numbed hands to the warmth. He believed that Jeanne Fitzhugh was unconscious, but now she spoke faintly, "Are you there, Sera?"

"Yes," Sera said, bending over her.

"Is Zachary Logan here also?"

"Yes. We're hiding among rocks not far from the river."

Zack lifted Jeanne Fitzhugh's hand and sought for the pulse in the wrist. Its beat was slow but

not as feeble as he had expected.

"The Indians will see the fire," Jeanne said faintly.

"They're a distance upriver," Zack answered. "We're on the tip of a high gout of rock. There's nothing above us for a fire to reflect against."

She managed a ghost of a smile. "I know why you're building that fire, Indians or no Indians."

Zack turned to Sera. "That arrow's got to come out. Get some of those clothes off her."

"You'll have to help me," Sera said. "It will spare her some of the pain."

Together, they stripped the sodden upper garments from Jeanne Fitzhugh.

Zack moved away and whetted the knife as best he could on a rock. He returned and spoke to Sera. "Tear up a petticoat or whatever for bandages."

He turned Jeanne on her side and made two swift, small slashes with the knife, penetrating to the arrowhead so that it could be pushed entirely through with a minimum amount of damage. Reaching across her body, he forced the feathered shaft forward, praying that it would not break inside her bosom.

It held. She had started screaming when the knife penetrated her flesh. She gave one great agonized cry as he moved the arrow. Blood was spurting. The arrowhead emerged. He broke it from the shaft and withdrew the shaft by the way it had entered.

It had taken but seconds.

They bound the wound. Zack went to the river and returned with soaked cloths in lieu of any other water-carrying receptacle.

Sera tended her niece's scalp injury as though it were suddenly important. "It will leave a scar, I fear," she said.

"That was done by a bullet," Zack said. "Someone notched mighty close on her."

"I heard you call them Mandans," Sera said. "But the Mandans have always been friends of Fitzhugh Fur."

"They were Mandans right enough," Zack said.

"How could that be? There must have been some terrible mistake."

"That must be it, ma'am. A mistake."

She was silent for a time, then said reluctantly, "You mean they thought it was a boat belonging to some other company?"

"Such things have been done before," Zack said.

Sera straightened. There was the same pride in her that he had seen in her niece. "Not by Fitzhugh Fur," she said.

"Are you sure?" he replied.

Suddenly she was not sure. She shifted to another subject. "Why have you done this?"

"Done what?"

"Stayed with us. Helped us."

Zack glared. "You're women, aren't you? What else could a man do?"

"I didn't notice any other men bothering," she said.

Zack eyed her. Her dress clung soddenly to her ample figure. Her hair hung in tatters. She was ice-pale as she huddled beside her niece. Her lips were almost blue.

"Get out of those wet clothes," he said abruptly. Spread them out to dry. Stay with your niece close to the fire. You must get warm and stay warm. Do as I say."

"What about you?" she demanded. "You're soaked, too."

"I'll take care of that later, I've been soaked before. I'm going out to look around."

He left the crevice and scouted the surroundings. The night was without sound. The Missouri was a pale ribbon, curving across the blackness of the plains. He descended and scanned the bluff from all angles, seeking to learn if the firelight was visible. Only from one point south of the eminence could he make out a tiny glint and even that could be mistaken for a star.

He returned to the knob. He called out softly as he approached the sanctuary. Sera's voice responded. He dropped into the cleft. The fire was burning low and he added fuel. Sera lay with her niece beneath a few of their garments that had dried, seeking to warm the pain-weakened girl with her own body.

"The pain is less, I believe," Sera whispered.

Jeanne's eyes drooped open and she gazed at Zack. "You use the knife well, fur thief," she murmured. She drifted off again.

Zack stretched himself out beside the fire and slept. He awakened before daylight and extinguished the fire, smothering each ember carefully.

"I think we'll have visitors out there who'll be looking for sign of anyone who might have got out of the river alive," he said.

Some two hours later, peering from a slit on the rim of the crevice, he sighted Mandans approaching along the river, scanning the ground.

The bluff became a point of interest and a dozen of them began mounting its flanks, peering into every crevice. Zack lowered himself to the floor of the niche.

Sera was staring at him, frightened, knowing from his expression that they were in great peril. Jeanne was breathing fast, moaning occasionally as pain drove through her. Zack moved to her side and touched her. Her eyes opened.

"It's important that none of us make a sound," he whispered. "The Mandans are out there, climbing the bluff, hunting for any who got ashore from the keelboat."

Her dry lips moved. "I'll be quiet." Her moaning and heavy breathing stopped.

There was nothing more than could be done. Their only weapon was the knife Zack had taken from Captain Biggle's body. He drew this. He could now hear the Mandans talking. A laugh came. Someone had slipped and taken a fall. The others were deriding him.

The jeering and horseplay continued on the bluff. The Mandans evidently were convinced there were no survivors of the keelboat, at least any within reach. Their voices sounded so nearby that Zack braced himself, the knife raised, ready to leap.

But no head appeared above the rim. No Indian took the trouble to make that last effort upward to the crest of the knob. In the next moment he heard them descending the bluff, whooping in the disgruntled way of warriors who feel that they have been made to waste their time.

Zack returned to his observation point. The Mandans were moving on down the river's margin.

Zack felt that there must have been other survivors. If so, they evidently had made their way out of reach of the Mandans during the night.

"They're going back to their towns," he said. "The hunt is over."

Fever burned in Jeanne Fitzhugh. At times she was beset by icy chills. Zack brought soaked cloths from the river to combat the fever, and firewood from the dry swamp to warm her when she shook uncontrollably.

He doubted if she would make it through the night. He could see that Sera was also near the end of her endurance. She had been without rest or food for nearly 24 hours—hours of battle and near-drowning and of flight and the strain of imminent capture.

All this had already laid a gaunt shadow on Sera's face. She had plaited her hair in a long pigtail which hung down her back. Its golden color was tarnished and Zack saw that at its roots the natural hue was dark, peppered with gray.

She caught him appraising her. "Do I look as terrible as all that?" she asked plaintively.

"How old are you, ma'am?" Zack asked.

"What a rude question. I'm in my 30's."

"That's what I figured," Zack declared. "I'd have said about 35."

"You are truly a bare-faced liar, aren't you?" she returned. "An ingratiating one, I must admit."

She sighed. "All I need is a little sleep. Say about 36 hours of it. A session with a hairdresser and a new frock. I might look almost 40 in the right kind of light."

She added, "And I could stand a bite of food." She watched Zack's expression. "I'm sorry I mentioned that," she went on. "But food seems to be on my mind."

Zack found himself patting her comfortingly on the shoulder. He was a little startled. What was coming over him, pitying a Fitzhugh? He said roughly, "I'll be gone a little while. Keep up the fire."

It was as though his voice aroused Jeanne from her coma. She moved, turned her head and looked at him, her eyes rational. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"I spotted some wreckage from the keelboat lodged in brush," Zack said. "You can only see it from high up. The Mandans overlooked it. There might be something we can use."

A darkening thought was mirrored in the faces of the two women as he turned away. Its memory followed him as he left the bluff. It was as though they shared an acceptance of something they deemed inevitable—and fatal to themselves.

He made his way to where he had sighted the wreckage. It was not easy to locate, now that he was at eye-level with the river, but, by wading to his shoulders through the cold water he finally came upon it. A portion of the deckhouse was lodged in swampy brush, along with a few planks and timbers. He sorted among them. He finally came upon a treasure in the form of two soaked blankets, and a sodden buffalo robe. With them were relics more grim. The bodies of two of the crew. It was a gruesome task, but the clothes and shoes of the dead might mean life for the living.

But he found no food nor anything that might reinforce his knife as a weapon. Wet and chilled he returned to the Owl's Nest, carrying his salvage. Dropping into the hideout, he paused, nonplussed. Sera and her niece were gazing at him strangely, and without speaking. He saw surging emotion in both the fever-flushed face of Jeanne and the tired features of Sera. Gladness! Uplifting gladness!

They dropped their gazes suddenly. Abruptly he understood. He knew now what had been in their minds when he had left them. They had never expected him to return. They had taken it for granted that he was deserting them.

That angered him. "You figured I had only thought up an excuse to weasel away by myself, didn't you?" he snapped.

Jeanne answered. "Neither of us would have blamed you. You are a fool for coming back. It will only make you feel that much worse when you do finally have to quit us. You will, you know, if you're to have any chance of getting out of this."

Zack hammered the wet blankets against rocks to flirt water from them. It also gave him opportunity to beat out some of his own resentment.

"See to it that the blankets are dried," he growled at Sera.

They eyed him for a time. "I still say you are being foolish," Jeanne said wearily.

He dried himself by the fire until darkness came. He carefully whetted the sheath knife and again prepared to leave the crevice. "Don't worry if I'm gone quite a spell," he said.

Again it was Jeanne who spoke. For the time at least she had emerged from the mists of pain. She motioned him to come close to her, and drew him down so that she could whisper in his ear. "You must not come back," she breathed insistently. "Take Sera with you. She must not die because of me. It's only just."

She meant it. Zack gazed at her, and felt a sudden tightness in his throat. "We've got to find food," he said. "I located elk in a thicket last night. They may yard up there every night. That's where I'm going."

"Elk. But, without a gun . . . ?"

Zack touched the knife. "It'll take big luck, but it's worth the try."

"It will be dangerous," she said. "I've heard that cornered elk can be terribly savage."

"Who told you about elk?" Zack asked, curious.

"I have talked to company agents and mountain men who came to the company office in New York at times."

"The office?" Zack questioned. "The Fitzhugh Fur office? But I've talked to men who visited Fitzhugh headquarters when they went back to see the sights of civilization. None of them had ever laid eyes on anyone known as J. K. Fitzhugh. Not even Angus Macleod. He told me he was in the Fitzhugh office several times when he went back there a summer or two ago, for he and your general manager, Paul Chalfant, were old friends. He never mentioned meeting you."

A glint of laughter brightened her thinned face. "I was there. I talked to Angus Macleod many times. I was working as a clerk in Uncle Paul's office. I thought it best to learn the business I had inherited, so I badgered Uncle Paul into letting me work as his amanuensis under an assumed name. Rev. Macleod knew me as a Miss Jessica Smith."

Zack's gaze was flat, without expression. He was thinking that if she had been that close to the operations of Fitzhugh Fur she must have known of its methods in the mountains.

He turned and vaulted to the rim of the niche. "I won't be far away. If you want me, toss a rock down the bluff. I'll hear it." He was gone then.

Jeanne lay listening, but no sound came back. She spoke after a time. "He despises us."

"He may have reason," Sera sighed.

"I'm beginning to fear that it's all true," Jeanne said.

"What's true?"

"The things Angus Macleod told Uncle Paul the company was doing in the mountains. Terrible things. The things we came here to learn the truth about for ourselves."

"Now don't go jumping to any wrong conclusions just on the word of Zack Logan," Sera protested. "Likely he's no better than the Indians who tried to kill us. Sometimes I wonder if it wasn't him who brought them down on us. Maybe he was the one they were after."

"That doesn't seem possible, and you know it," Jeanne said. "Instead of him bringing the Mandans down on us I had a terrible feeling that it was you and me they were trying to kill above all. It seemed to me their fire was concentrated mainly on our position at all times. I heard someone shouting orders to them. In English and in Indian language. A white man's voice."

"You must have imagined it," Sera said. "Of course, there might be white renegades with the Mandans."

"I believe that voice was directing the fire upon us."

"Now you are having the vapors!" Sera protested.

CHAPTER II

ZACK inched his way along a game trail in the dry swamp. Elk were near. He found a great cottonwood deadfall whose rootbase poised it six feet above ground which offered a vantage point on which to lie. He flattened out on the prone trunk and the vigil began.

His thoughts turned to Jeanne Fitzhugh. He remembered her courage as he had prepared to remove the arrow. She had never whimpered. Nor had Sera complained of the hardships.

He went over in his mind the events of the massacre of the keelboat crew. Night battles were contrary to Indian nature. This attack had been carefully planned. The Mandans had been well-organized and amply supplied with arms and powder and lead. He remembered the voice he had heard, shouting orders. He felt that it had belonged to Quinn Spain, the bourgeois at Fort Jeanne, but it was fantastic to believe that Spain would bring down a raid on one of his company's own boats, particularly when he knew that the grand patron was aboard.

His thoughts snapped back to the present. An elk was approaching, indolently cropping at tufts of vegetation. He tensed, preparing to spring. But the animal changed course and drifted away. Silence came again. Zack sank back.

Midnight came and passed, according to the stars. He began to believe the elk had scented him and had left the brush. He was about to give up the vigil, when he heard another animal nearby. It grazed steadily toward him.

Again he gripped the knife and made ready. The elk came nearer. It was a dim, bulky shadow. Then he made out the silhouet of its antlers close at hand. It was a full-grown bull. He had hoped for a cow or a calf, or at worst a yearling bull. But he had no choice.

The animal snorted and threw back its head. It had caught the alien scent.

Zack leaped. The distance was no more than six feet and he landed astride the animal's back, the knife lifted high. He had visualized this part of it during his long wait and had mapped out his method of attack.

The elk reared in an attempt to unseat him, its terrified whistle rising. He drove the knife downward, aiming at the spinal cord at the base of the skull. The animal's action threw him off balance. Nevertheless he felt the blade plunge deep. He tried to withdraw it for another stroke, but the elk whirled wildly and he lost his grip on the knife.

The elk spun violently and he was flung loose and plunged to the ground at the beast's feet. It slashed at him with its hooves. A heavy blow raked his arm. He rolled away and the elk turned and ran. The others of the band had already headed for the plains. The roar of their flight receded.

Zack crawled shakily from his refuge and got to his feet. His sleeve was ripped and his left arm dripped gore. He climbed back to the knob and dropped heavily into the crevice.

Sera had kept the fire alive. Jeanne's head lifted and she stared wildly. It came to him how he must look, smeared with dust and blood.

"I tried to fetch down an elk, but he was too much for me," Zack said. He added, with a tired gesture, "I even lost the knife. I've got us in a worse fix than ever. I'm surely sorry." He sat down, his legs suddenly without strength.

Sera came to his side with a cry and examined his injured arm. The damage was gory, but was not much more serious than a painful scrape. Sera went to the river alone over Zack's protests, braving the cold and darkness, to bring back soaked cloths, which she used to bathe the injury.

Jeanne's pain-darkened gaze remained fixed on him as Sera cared for the injury. Zack could see that she was losing ground. She was burning with fever.

"I lost the knife," he said again, self-condemnation tearing at him. "I ought to have held on to it."

"Go away," Jeanne gasped wildly. "Go away from this place, Zachary Logan. Take Sera with you. Quit mocking me."

She turned her face away and did not speak again. Sera moved to her side and smoothed back her hair. She returned to Zack and murmured, "She's worse. She's much weaker."

"She needs food," Zack said. "And so do you."

Sera massaged the sinews of his neck and shoulders with the comforting touch of a woman. "Stop blaming yourself," she protested. "If it has to be that way, it is God's will."

She spread a blanket close to the fire. "You need rest," she said. "I'll stay awake."

Zack fell asleep almost at once. Whenever he awakened he found the fire burning warmly. Sera was looking after it. He slept until dawn. He was finally aroused by the barking and snarling of coyotes in the distance.

He arose and gazed from the rim of the Owl's Nest. The brushy flat where he had met disaster with the elk extended to a clay floodbank. Beyond that stretched the bunch grass plains. Far to the south the plains broke into a collection of folded hills.

Not far beyond the cutbank a mottled gray object of some size lay in the bunch grass. Coyotes were circling, barking and racing in occasionally only to retreat.

It was the bull elk! It had made it that far from the brush in the darkness, and there it had fallen, too weak to continue. Evidently it was still alive or the pack would have closed in.

Zack uttered a great shout. He ran down the bluff and through the brush and to the open flat. The coyotes retreated yammering frenziedly. The elk was breathing its last as he reached its side. It made a noble effort to rise and thrust at him with its antlers. Then it expired.

—Sera had followed Zack. Between them, they spent the day carving and carrying meat to the sanctuary and holding the coyotes at bay. Gray wolves, ravens and magpies arrived, awaiting a chance to claim a share of the spoils. But no human contender for the elk, or for their scalps, appeared.

* * *

Zack and Sera broiled meat over the fire in the hideout. It restored their own vitality, but if Jeanne strengthened under the stimulus of the tiny morsels that Sera placed between her lips the change was not apparent. She was almost too weak to swallow. When dusk came her link to life was very frail.

Dusk brought a new foe. A cold fingertip touched Zack's forehead. Snow! Sera gave him a tragic look. The plains winter had arrived.

When darkness closed in the snow was sweeping over the knob, carried by a rising wind. Occasional flakes were blown under the overhang where they glistened and vanished on Jeanne's flushed cheeks. She was aware of Sera's despair. With a surge of strength she drew her aunt close and kissed her.

Sera seemed to find solace and hope. She was sobbing but she conquered that. Jeanne spoke to Zack. "There will be no more tears. From either of us. We will not add things like that to your burden."

The snow was still flooding down when daybreak came. Zack brought rocks and built a smokehouse. Without salt, the smoked meat would be tough and tasteless, but it would sustain them. The storm had at least one advantage for them. It shielded the meat-smoking activities in case any searcher was about in this weather.

Jeanne lay thin and waxen. Zack searched the bluff until he found a flat rock which had a hollow formed by weather. This unwieldly cup would hold more than a pint of liquid. He and Sera heated it slowly, carefully by the fire, fearing each moment that it would crack. It remained intact and they added elk meat and water and watercress and let the result simmer.

This broth Jeanne was able to swallow. Afterwards she fell into deep sleep.

The snow turned to a driving rain. This was harder to bear than the snow. Rain seeped into their shelter, adding to their misery. But they managed to keep the patient dry and warm.

Jeanne was still alive at daybreak.

The rain ended but the weather remained cold and dreary. Each day, each night Zack hunted for game without result.

Peering from the Owl's Nest, he saw dark specks on the plains to the southwest which had not been there at dark the previous day. Buffalo.

He spent a tense, freezing day stalking them, but each time he tried to close in, the beasts scented him and stampeded. The herd grew wilder and more alert each time. Darkness found him far from the Owl's Nest and empty-handed. It was long past midnight when he mounted the bluff, weary to the bone and famished. The warmth of the firelit sanctuary reached out to him. Sera had elk meat broiling.

The weather had turned colder. She helped him out of the ice-stiffened poncho he had made from one of the blankets. She knelt and removed the brogans from his blistered feet which were more accustomed to mocassins. She again massaged his back and neck, a ministration that seemed to magically ease weariness.

"Your medicine is good, M'mselle," he said.

The fireglow reflected ruddily from the walls. Here, for the moment at least, was security after the loneliness of the plains. He saw in Sera's face the brightness of released tension. His glance swung to Jeanne.

Sera spoke in a whisper as though fearing that words might break some frail and priceless spell. "She's better."

Jeanne was looking up at him, and the shadow of a smile showed. "I'm going to make it now, fur thief," she murmured. "It's high time I turned back, isn't it?"

There was no doubt about it. A new quality was in her voice. There was a small spark in the depths of her hollow eyes as though some ember had sprung into life.

Yes, she had turned back on the dark path down which she had been drifting. Zack took her hand.

"Yes," he said, and found that his voice was husky, "you've been playing possum long enough."

By morning there was no doubt that their patient was gaining. She was able to eat a little. Zack saw the first faint return of color in her throat.

He spent the day at lookout. His attention was centred mainly on the country across the river. Jeanne finally spoke. "What is it that you keep staring at?"

"Smoke," Zack said. "North of the river, but not too far. A Mandan town, I'm sure. I didn't figure any would be close enough to be in reach."

"In reach?"

"We've got to raise us some kind of a weapon that'll be better than a knife," he said.

She and Sera suddenly understood what was in his mind. He was planning on raiding a Mandan house for weapons. Sera framed a protest, then decided not to voice it. Jeanne finally spoke. "The river? How will you get across?"

"On a raft," Zack said.

"You should not try it. You know that."

"If you stood in my place what would you do?" Zack asked.

"I would—why I would—" She had no answer. Zaek shrugged. The matter was settled.

The thicket, after considerable searching, yielded dry, light lengths of half-dead timber which he carried to the river and lashed together. He returned to the sanctuary and slept until early darkness came, then rose.

Jeanne spoke. "How long do you expect to be gone?"

"A day or two. Three, maybe." He hesitated. "If I'm not back in a week I won't be back at all."

She nodded gravely. "I understand. We can reach Fort Jeanne by following the river. Or is there a better way?"

Again Zack hesitated, then said, "Follow the river."

"How far away is the fort?"

"Maybe about 80 miles in a straight line. Farther

by river. Three sleeps. You'll have to move slow and careful or you might bump into Indians who'll be painted."

"I'll be able to travel as soon as you are back," she said.

"We'll not be hasty about that," Zack said.

"We can't stay here much longer," she declared.

This same perplexity had been nagging at Zack. "We'll move out as soon as possible after I get back," he said.

"It will be so wonderful to see Uncle Paul again," she said.

Zack stiffened a little. Jeanne saw this hardening of his features and knew its cause. "You hate my uncle, don't you?"

"Hate is not the right word," Zack said. "Contempt is more like it. Do you expect me to think kindly of a man who connived in robbing me and stood by watching while I was chained to a post and whipped?"

He added: "I'm not the only one. Other men have been whipped by Fitzhugh Fur. Belzey Williams, the mountain man I told you about, for one. He was a Logan partisan, and when they couldn't get their hands on me, they caught Belzey and gave him the lash, as an example of what would happen to me."

Her head sank back. She did not speak for a time. "We had been hearing disturbing reports of such things as you say happened to you and your friend," she finally said, and Zack saw that she had made up her mind to face the issue. "That is not the way my father conducted the business, nor my grandfather, nor my great-grandfather who founded the company. Nor Paul Chalfant. In fact Uncle Paul sent for the bourgeois at Fort Jeanne, Quinn Spain, to come to the New York office as far back as the summer before last and explain."

"Just what was he to explain?"

"The complaints of course. Another thing that had been worrying Uncle Paul was the fact that the company had been losing money for the past three or four years. Not enough plews have been coming out of Fort Jeanne to pay expenses."

"So it was money that brought you here," Zack said.

She flushed. "Partly. Apparently you are also in the mountains for that purpose. What is wrong with trying to earn money? In any event, Mr. Spain, when he arrived in New York, denied the accusations. He said the truth is that Fitzhugh Fur is the one who is being preyed on by other companies. He named the Logan brothers in particular, as the ones who had started that practice. He said they now have imitators."

"And did your uncle believe that?"

"Mr. Spain has been bourgeois at Fort Jeanne for 10 years," she said. "Uncle Paul has confidence in him. I was impressed by him also. He is a handsome man."

"I was more than impressed by him," Zack said.

"Uncle Paul believed Mr. Spain," she went on. "But, about that time, Angus Macleod arrived from the mountains. As you said he told you, he and Uncle Paul have been close friends since they were young men. Rev. Macleod supported the charges that had been made against Fitzhugh Fur, not from personal knowledge, but from talking to trappers. Rev. Macleod had never been at Fort Jeanne, his work keeping him more in the Platte River country to the south. But reports had reached him. Mr. Spain defended himself strongly. He said that Rev. Macleod was being used as a tool by disgruntled fur thieves who had been driven out of Fitzhugh territory."

"That's the way Angus told it to me," Zack admitted.

"There seemed to be only one way of arriving at the truth of the matter. Uncle Paul came back to the mountains that same summer to look into it personally."

"Why is Chalfant still at Fort Jeanne?" Zack asked.

"He had intended to return east this past summer, but we received word by the first boat down the Missouri last spring that he would be delayed."

"So you came up the Missouri to do some investigating in person?" Zack asked.

"A woman's whim, I suppose. Or a woman's foolishness."

"Or to find out if your uncle is in cahoots with Spain in robbing you," Zack said.

Her voice rose a trifle. "I'll never believe that."

Sera tried to intervene. "Please go away, Zachary Logan. This is doing her no good. You'll give her a setback."

"I'm sorry!" Zack exclaimed. "We'll talk this over some other time."

"We'll talk it over now," Jeanne said. "What about the sables you mentioned?"

"The sables I intend to get back," Zack said. "From Paul Chalfant or from Quinn Spain. With a whip, if necessary. With a gun, if needed. With a knife if they want it that way."

He left the Owl's Nest. The knob faded into the stormy sky above him as he descended the bluff. He found his raft and poled it away from the bank. Reaching deeper water he used the pole as a sweep, forcing it toward the dark far shore.

It was deep, stormy dusk two days later when he again fought his way through swirling snow and saw the shape of the knob against the sky. Full darkness came as he ascended its rocky flanks. He was frostbitten, his clothing frozen stiff on his chilled, boneweary body.

He carried on his back a weighty pack formed of a cornered mackinaw blanket. He had slung over his shoulder a rifle, horn and pouch, along with a long Mandan hunting bow and a quiver of arrows. A sharp-edge axe was thrust in his belt, and also a second hunting knife in addition to his own.

A dreary fear entered him as he climbed. It seemed to him there could be no such silence if there was life still in the Owl's Nest. It was not until he reached the very knob that he saw the flint of firelight. He called out, and felt a great upward surge of spirit when Sera answered.

He dropped into the crevice. Strength revived within him and he gleefully swung the pack from his back. "Santa Claus is ahead of time this year," he said, grinning.

Jeanne was propped in a sitting position near the fire, wrapped in a blanket. There was now no doubt about the play of color in her throat. She was looking at him with bright joy. It was evident she had strengthened rapidly.

Sera rushed to him in tears, threw her arms around him and kissed his unshaven cheek. "We're so glad you're back. So glad!"

Zack said, "Now don't take on like that. I always show up. You must know that by this time."

He opened his pack and both women uttered little screams of delight. First, Zack drew out a copper cooking kettle, sooty with recent use, which Sera seized upon with awe as though it were precious beyond words.

The pack yielded other treasures—blankets and powder and lead. A heavy roll of pemmican, a huge gourd containing parched corn and a supply of venison jerky.

Clothing also appeared. A man's fine, fur-trimmed capote, along with blanket breeches, double-breasted woollen shirt and heavy moccasin pacs. There were three other pairs of moccasins in the collection. And at last an excellent deerskin smock, handsomely beaded and lined with warm fox fur, along with the high warm winter moccasins that Mandan women prefer.

Jeanne looked up at Zack, her eyes glistening. "You're so tired, so thin—so terribly thin. You're half-frozen."

Sera, with a cry of self-reproach, forgot the treasures, and turned her attention to Zack. She pulled off his frozen jacket and built the fire higher. She laid out the warm, dry clothing that he had brought, and swiftly heated food.

"Now tell us about it," Jeanne said.

"Not too much to tell," Zack said. "I got across the river and headed north. It was a big Mandan town that was putting out the smoke I had sighted, but half a dozen houses were at a distance from the main town. A dance was being held in the council circle. I crawled into a house that I figured had nobody at home."

He shrugged. "I had made a mistake. A squawman was there with a young Mandan woman. But I knocked the wind out of both of them before they could make a peep. I tied and gagged them, took what I could find handy, and lit a shuck out of there. I heard a lot of whooping after I was in the clear. There was pursuit, but I got back to my raft and floated down the river a long ways before heading back this way. Snow came in time to hide my tracks."

Jeanne lifted the rifle he had brought from the Mandan house. It was an Indian weapon, the stock adorned with brass tacks and other ornaments. A scalp was tacked to it. She realized suddenly what this was. She started to place the rifle hurriedly aside, then forced herself to retain it. She had noticed something else that had aroused her interest. She held the weapon near the firelight, peering closely at the shoulder rest.

"It looks like blood," she said quietly. "And a few short strands of brown hair. It could be red hair." She looked at him. "At least it isn't black, like that of an Indian."

Zack hesitated. "I had to hit the squawman with the rifle butt," he said. "He was a white man."

She dropped the subject as though suddenly afraid to pursue it. She indicated the smock. "It looks useful."

"I figured it would be about your size," Zack said.

"It will probably fit Sera better, at least until I gain back a few lost pounds," she said, smiling. "How fortunate that you found such a garment. Where do the Mandans keep such things in their teepees?"

"Mandans live in houses made of logs and mud, not lodges," Zack explained. "Oh, they hang stuff around on pegs or whatever's handy, or store it in parfleche bags and such-like."

She eyed him thoughtfully. "Are you sure it wasn't being worn at the time you found it?"

"I'll smoke it over the fire tomorrow," Zack said. "That ought to take care of any no-seeums if there are any."

"That wasn't what I meant. So it was being worn?"

"Sort of," Zack admitted, cornered.

"Sort of? Do you mean you actually took the clothes off an Indian woman?"

"Sort of," Zack sighed.

"And this squawman?" she demanded.

"I took his clothes too," Zack confessed. "Peeled 'em both like onions."

Jeanne began to laugh. She laughed until she was breathless. "That must have been a sight," she gasped. "Sort of."

The amusement had enlivened her. She lay fingering the smock, studying him, while Sera bustled around, broiling more elk meat and concocting a stew of parched corn and pemmican.

"We'll be able to start for Fort Jeanne in no time at all," she said. "I'm recovering much faster than I anticipated."

Zack did not answer. She waited. When she saw that he was not going to speak, she did not pursue the subject. Some of the animation faded out of her.

CHAPTER III

JEANNE'S recovery was rapid. Each day she became more impatient, badgering Zack to set an immediate date for their departure for Fort Jeanne. Fort Jeanne was on her tongue constantly. It was the mecca, the goal of all goals, where all anxieties and misunderstandings would be settled.

Finally, she could contain her impatience no longer. "We will start tomorrow," she said flatly. Nightfall had come.

When Zack shook his head she blazed into anger. "You're only being pig-headed! I'm strong enough to travel."

"Not yet, you aren't," Zack snapped. "Confound it, I don't want to have to pack you on my back all the way to the Little Buffalo."

She stared. "The Little Buffalo? Isn't that the name of a river that flows into the Missouri quite a long distance downstream. Fort Jeanne isn't in that direction. What do you mean?"

Zack had let the wrong name drop. She was pinning him with suspicious eyes. "I don't think you—we ought to try for Fort Jeanne," he said lamely.

"Why not?" She saw something in his face that aroused a dread.

"You remember me telling you that Belzey Williams had two Crow wives and that he was on his way to winter with their people? That Crow village is on the headwaters of the Little Buffalo river. It should be just south of us, beyond those breaks that we can see in the plains. It shouldn't be hard to find. It might be wise to stay with Belzey until you're stronger."

He laughed hollowly. "Two wives, poor fellow. Belzey has his troubles, I suppose, without us adding to them."

Jeanne did not respond to his sad attempt at levity. "What is the real reason you don't want us to go to Fort Jeanne?" she asked slowly. "Something happened the night you raided that Mandan

house. I've always known you didn't tell us everything."

"The warriors from that village were in on the massacre of the keelboat crew," he said. "I saw scalps hanging on poles, and Mandans wearing clothes that could not be mistaken."

She was on her feet, trying out her strength. She stood straight and pale. Sera uttered a small sighing sound, but did not speak. Both of them waited, knowing he had more to say.

"The man whose blood you noticed on the rifle wasn't exactly a squawman," he went on. "He was Quinn Spain, your bourgeois at Fort Jeanne."

The new color left her thin features. "You're saying that Quinn Spain himself must have had a hand in sending that raid down on us. Why should he do that?"

"Maybe because you were aboard."

"Go on," she said.

"Maybe Spain didn't want you to reach Fort Jeanne. Maybe he didn't want to have to explain a lot of things."

"You're trying to tell me he wanted me dead," she said. "Murdered. Do you know that you are saying he had all those lusty men in the crew killed so that nobody would live to tell what had happened?" Her voice was rising. "Worse than that, you're saying that Uncle Paul Chalfant is in this with him!"

"Up to his chin," Zack said grimly. "Up to his black mind."

She began to shake. "I'll never believe that. My own flesh and blood. Uncle Paul has always been so kind, so gentle. He could never do such a thing. Never!"

It was some time before she could speak calmly again. "What if you can't find this Crow village? What if this man, Belzey Williams, isn't there? What if the Crows are unfriendly?"

She had bowed to his decision, even though she still believed he was wrong. "We'll jump that hurdle when we reach it," he said.

"How soon can we start?"

"Within a week, with luck," he said. "Sooner if you take it easy and don't bring on a setback."

"All right," she said wearily.

She huddled on her pallet and Zack sat by the fire, his long legs folded beneath him.

Sera was washing the makeshift items they had accumulated as eating utensils. The dark shadow of the mystery of Paul Chalfant lay over them, but at least a definite decision had been made as to their destination after they left this lonely place.

Zack's head lifted suddenly. Jeanne saw this, and he moved a warning hand, silencing her. He heard it again, the whisking sound of a foot or knee sliding across rock. Someone was out there on the knob!

Zack came to his feet in a lunging thrust of movement. As he did so the figure of a man rose into view above him. The intruder was Jules Lebow, the bearded, massive voyageur who had wielded the whip on Zack at Quinn Spain's order.

Lebow held a rifle and it was trained on Zack. He fired, but Zack, aided by his momentum in rising, had plunged beneath the gun in time, tipping it upward. The bullet went wide. Lebow tried to retreat but Zack grasped his ankle.

Lebow swung the muzzle of the rifle savagely. Zack ducked and the rifle struck the rim, snapping off the stock. Zack jerked the man off the rim and into the crevice. Lebow landed on top. Despite Zack's straining opposition his opponent managed to draw his knife which was scabbarded in a wide belt outside his capote.

Lebow would have driven the blade into Zack's side, but Sera caught his arm. That overbalanced him and enabled Zack to rise to a knee. Sera was whirled aside. Zack's knife lay on a flat stone near the fire. He rolled and seized it. He had no time to rise and balance himself for a thrust because Lebow was lunging at him. Jeanne had crawled within reach of Zack's rifle which leaned against the wall beyond the combatants. She had no time to attempt to fire it. All she could do was seize it and hurl it at Lebow.

It flailed beneath the man's legs, tripping him. Zack instinctively twisted around and thrust his knife upward. Lebow impaled himself on the blade as he fell.

Zack cautiously peered over the rim of the Owl's Nest. He pulled himself to the surface and descended. He became convinced there were no other opponents on the bluff. A shrill whistle drifted from a distance in the darkness below. It came again from another point.

Zack returned to the crevice and kicked dirt on the fire, deadening it to a faint glow. Lebow's body lay twisted on its side. "There are others out there," Zack said. "They're signalling. They must have heard the shot, but I don't believe they know from which direction it came."

He paused, then added: "They might guess before long. They'll soon know something's happened to Lebow. They might search the bluff. We've got to pull out. At once."

"At once?" Sera echoed, aghast. "But . . . !"

Zack eyed Jeanne wryly. "I said I'd be hanged if I wanted to carry you on my back all the way to the Little Buffalo. It looks like I'll have to eat my words."

"You can't do it, of course," she said. "After all, I'm a little scrawny right now, but I'm still a full-grown person. Let's face facts."

"And these facts?"

"I will keep going as long as I'm not a danger to you and Sera. When I decide that I am, you two will go on."

"Bosh!" Sera snorted.

Zack formed blankets into ponchos for the women by cutting openings for their heads. Sera carried their meagre supply of food and what few spare items of value they possessed. Zack slung the rifle and bow across his chest.

He appraised Jeanne. "That'll help balance me," he mused. "I'd say you're down to around 100 pounds."

He covered the body of Jules Lebow with loose rocks and smothered the fire. They stood for a moment in darkness. Now that the fire was out this place was no longer a sanctuary but a tomb. Zack wondered if any of them would live to reach the Little Buffalo. He had told the women that the stream was beyond the breaks in the plains to the south, but the fact was he was only guessing. He had no way of knowing how far south of the breaks the stream might lie. Or they might never find it.

"My guess is that the one direction they're sure we won't go is south into the plains," he said. "They'll expect us to either head upstream for the fort, or follow the river down to get out of the country."

He lifted the two women out of the Owl's Nest and joined them on the rim.

"All right," he said. Jeanne hesitated, then placed her arms around his shoulders and he lifted her on his back.

"No more talk," he said.

He picked his way down the bluff, giving a hand to Sera at times. He halted often to listen, but there was no indication that any danger was near. Soon they were on the open plain.

Zack estimated that the breaks in the plain were more than 10 miles to the south. This offered the first chance of any real concealment. When daylight came, anything that moved on the open expanse of country would no doubt be sighted by anyone watching from vantage points.

"Let me walk for awhile," Jeanne said.

She walked for five minutes, clinging to his arm. She began to stumble and he carried her again.

During the first miles, Zack rested only at long intervals. Jeanne insisted on walking for such short distances as her strength permitted. A waning moon arose, giving some light to guide the way.

Zack stumbled and then went to his knees. This time Jeanne pushed him away when he arose and attempted to carry her again. "It was agreed that you two will go on," she said. "I will follow."

"There was no agreement," Zack said harshly.

He lifted her almost forcibly in his arms. The clash seemed to give him strength and he kept going.

Dawn showed at last to the east, but blackness still lay ahead. Zack suddenly realized that this blackness was the heavy bulk of hills. They were near the rough country.

Revived by the knowledge that their destination was near, they hurried ahead. Soon they stumbled down the banks of a ravine where a partly-frozen creek glinted among bare brush. They had made it off the open plain in time. They now had a covert and fuel for a fire. Presently they were all asleep.

They resumed the flight at noon, following the course of the creek. Zack was sure that it was a tributary to the Little Buffalo.

They sighted a band of deer in a flat and he downed a young doe. They ate venison beside their campfire. That, and a full night's sleep helped them all, especially Jeanne. When they set out again in the morning she walked, clinging to Zack's arm, until he again almost forcibly insisted on carrying her.

Zack discovered that the creek was being trapped. He pointed. "See the bent willows? They mark traps. That's a white man's way of setting."

Later on, he studied a moccasin track at the stream's margin. "A white man's foot," he said. "About Belzey Williams' size. This might be his trap line."

It was past noon the next day when Zack spotted a lank figure ahead, wrapped in a blanket, moving along the creek, a catch bag on his back in which he was carrying the game his traps had produced.

Zack ran ahead, grinning. "Belzey, you old yoohaw! Lucky I'm not a Ree or a Blackfoot, or you'd be shy your hair."

Belzey Williams had snatched his rifle off his shoulder. He lowered the gun and peered. "I tell yuh now, Zack Logan," he complained in a high, nasal voice. "You did give me a skeer, an' that's a fact. I'm gittin' mighty careless." He was lank and seamed and lantern-jawed and dressed like an Indian.

He stared as Jeanne and Sera appeared from cover. "Now you do stun a man," he said. "This hoss has been through some odd doin's in his day, but I never yit seen two purty females come out'n the brush dressed like that. Air they supposed to be squaws?"

Zack briefly told Belzey of the injustice he had received at Fort Jeanne, and of Angus Macleod's death and the keelboat massacre.

Belzey had carried out his intention of wintering with his wives' people after he had parted with Zack and Angus Macleod the same day Quinn Spain and his men had accosted Zack.

"Tain't much of a village," Belzey explained, "but that's all the more reason they'll be glad to have another hunter to help fetch meat. A'ter they git a look at the size of you, there won't be any trouble, you hear me now. You even top Owl in size. He's the chief."

At dusk they emerged into view of the frozen Little Buffalo river. Near at hand, unutterably lonely in aspect, a score of Crow lodges were huddled in the lee of a low ridge.

Belzey hurried ahead to pave the way for them and waved for them to come in. Brown faces gazed out at them from the wind-whipped lodges as they entered the village. Belzey led them to his lodge. It was a winter lodge, sizeable, with double walls of buffalo leather, insulated against the cold. Robes and pelts covered the floor. A meat pot hung over the fire. Sleeping pallets stood close to the walls.

Sera spoke in a hushed voice. "It's warm! So warm! I can't believe it!"

It came to Zack that she and Jeanne had not been really warm since the loss of the keelboat.

"These here," Belzey said awkwardly, "air Yellow Blossom an' Hunts-The-Rainbow."

Belzey's two wives were present but so shy they had remained sitting cross-legged in the background where they were carrying on one of the endless tasks of Indian women. In this case it was moccasin-making.

Hunts-The-Rainbow's reticence was feigned. She was with child, and was therefore being pampered. Aware of her superior position, she was gazing down her nose a trifle at these white, unmarried females.

Jeanne moved closer and gazed admiringly at their handiwork. "How neatly you work," she said. "Perhaps you will teach me."

Belzey translated her words. Yellow Blossom and Hunts-The-Rainbow covered their mouths with their hands, for it is very improper for one to reveal startled laughter to a stranger. But they were pleased.

"They'll git along," Belzey predicted. "Looks like yore tow-headed gal is cut from the same strip o' whangleather as them Crow women, Zack. Needs considerable fattenin' though."

"Well, I never!" Sera exclaimed, bristling.

"An' you, too, ma'am," Belzey said. "Even now, you're a right nice figger of a woman."

Sera backed hurriedly away. Jeanne said, "I believe he's thinking of taking a third wife, Aunt, dear. You may have a proposal in the making."

"Why, you old reprobate!" Sera exploded, giving Belzey a withering glare. "I should think two wives would be enough to tame you down."

Belzey eyed her with growing admiration. "Now there's a gal with spunk," he declared. "The kind a man needs to set up his lodge, an' that's for sure."

Sera took refuge back of Zack. "Merciful

heavens!" she breathed. "I'm afraid he means it."

* * *

Zack rode into the Crow village, mounted on a shaggy Indian pony whose winter coat was adorned with icicles. Streamers of frost hung in the air. The smoke from the wings of the lodges floated low in the village as though unable to rise against the weight of the numbing cold. Snow was piled high around the walls.

He was accompanied by a dozen Crows, all stiffened by the cold. Yet they were all elated. They were returning from a week-long hunt. The packhorses were heavily laden with buffalo meat. Succulent fleece and humpribs. Great haunches and steaks. Tongue that would be smoked. Liver and brains and boudins and other delicacies that are dear to the Indian appetite. All frozen solid now.

Zack's mount carried an additional item. A small cedar tree was tied across the pommel. It was little more than three feet high and Zack had carried it many miles.

The Crows came pouring from the lodges to greet them. Jeanne appeared, drawing on a blanket and a fur cowl. Sera gazed briefly from the door of the lodge. She held a bone awl in her hand, being busy helping Yellow Blossom at the interminable task of making moccasins.

Zack tried to dismount, but found that his cold-brittle legs would not respond. Jeanne came hurrying. He used her as a crutch, but she was forced to pull him bodily from the pony. He clumped woodenly to the ground. Both of them fell, despite her efforts to steady him. She helped him to his feet. They stood laughing.

The drums were sounding triumphantly. The Crow women started a chant of victory. They had been on starvation rations lately and now they would eat their fill once again. Jeanne, smiling, joined in the chant. She had now completely recovered and her hair hung in a braid in Indian fashion. She wore moccasins. She was still thin because of the scarcity of food. Snow glare had tanned her skin to a golden hue.

Zack carried the frost-rimed tree into Belzey's lodge. He said, "Look! It's already decorated. What a shame to let all that pretty foofaraw melt."

Jeanne had accompanied him. "It can't be!" she cried.

"But it is," Zack said. "It's Christmas Eve."

She and Sera and the two Crow women quickly cooked a meal. Afterwards, Jeanne and Sera lovingly set up the tree. Yellow Blossom and Hunts-The-Rainbow stood by, beaming, but mystified. The wintry ornamentation had melted in the warmth of the lodge. Jeanne snipped bits of bright scarlet cloth from remnants in the sewing bags and tied them on branches. Sera hung a glass bead in the foliage and added a polished bearclaw and several elk teeth.

The Indian women, seeing what was wanted, hurried about, finding offerings to bring to the Yule tree. Other Crows, who had been peering into the lodge, caught the spirit. The village was ransacked. Bits of broken mirror and ornaments of broken buffalo horn were added to the decorations. Colorful feathers, brass rings and tinkling hawks' bells appeared.

One withered old warrior, scarred by battle and the sun dance, offered a treasured scalp, a memento of some mighty feat of the past. This, Zack managed to assure him tactfully, should remain always in his own possession.

The little tree was weighed down with the glitter. "It is their big medicine," a Crow father explained to his young son. "It is where their gods live."

Tears ran down Jeanne's face. "I'm glad you remembered," she said to Zack. "I'm ashamed that I did not."

Time had indeed raced by since their arrival in the Crow village. Zack had been taken into the lodge of Owl, the chief, while Jeanne and Sera remained quartered in Belzey's domicile.

Sera had balked at that arrangement at first. "It's disgraceful, living under the same roof with a bigamist," she had moaned.

But only recently Zack had heard her say with a weary sigh to Hunts-The-Rainbow, "It's a blessing there are two of you. There's no end to the clothes and moccasins a man tears to pieces, or the hides that are to be scraped and stretched and the wood and water that has to be brought in. I pray for you that the child you're expecting will be a daughter so that she will be of some help to you."

Hunts-The-Rainbow was shocked. It was a son she wanted, of course. Another warrior for the village, not a carrier of wood and water. They had wrangled about it until Belzey, resting by the fire, smoking his pipe had reared up., "Quit this cussed gabble-gobble!" he had thundered. "It's puttin' my brain in a clutter. Git some fixin's in the pot. My gut's empty."

"Vulgarian!" Sera had snapped.

"I kin guess what you called me," Belzey had snarled. "If you was my woman I'd take a lodgepole to you."

"Just you try it, you lazy old curmudgeon," Sera had returned. "I might do a little lodgepoling myself. Now get out of here and make room for us to cook a meal, you no-account."

Jeanne worked with the other women, carrying her share of the wood and water each morning. She had learned to carve and cook buffalo and elk meat and venison, and helped in the sewing. She had picked up the Crow language quickly.

Yellow Blossom and Hunts-The-Rainbow treated her as a sister. Sera, to them, was a wise and sometimes scolding maternal influence on which they could depend in time of mental stress. Hunts-The-Rainbow's time was at hand and this was to be her first child. She was young and frightened and was finding great comfort in Sera's presence.

The winter was one of the worst in the memory of the old men. Blizzard upon blizzard had held them in the lodges for days at a time. Only lately had the weather settled, clear and cold. Movement by hunters had become impossible.

Zack watched Jeanne as she moved about. The practical Indian smock she wore could not disguise the good lines of her figure. With her tawny hair and smoky blue eyes she could never be mistaken for an Indian woman.

He was possessed by a great rush of desire. He was aware that she saw this in him. She straightened, but did not waver. She awaited whatever was his decision. This, at least, was Indian-like.

The thought came to him that this readiness to comply to his will was only because she believed he had saved her life. He wanted nothing of that sort of reward. Anger came in him.

Also Indian-like had been her silence on the subject of Fort Jeanne.

He wheeled abruptly and left the lodge. He strode to Owl's lodge through the throbbing activity of the village. Belzey followed him and sat cross-legged as he bathed. Owl's wife, Floating Leaf, a tall, handsome graying woman, brought an iron kettle of hot water.

Belzey removed the pipe from between his teeth and spoke. "Two strangers was here while you was away makin' meat."

Zack turned. "Strangers? White men?"

"Burned woods they was. Bois brules. French-Indians. Had foofaraw fer trade. Hawk's bells, beads an' such. Came on foot. They said the Rees on Grand River had stole their ponies."

Zack was grim. "What did they look like?"

"I didn't see 'em myself. I was away, runnin' my trap line. Old Gray Elk—he's the one what tried to hang a scalp on the Christmas tree tonight—was here. He told me they was Fitzhugh fur men. He said he'd seen 'em at Fort Jeanne last fall."

"When were they here?"

"Five days ago," Belzey said. "The day after you left on the hunt. They didn't come from the direction of Fort Jeanne. Came from the south. But that was only a blind. I sent a couple o' young Crows to trail 'em. These bois brules turned north an' crossed the Missouri, headin' for the Mandan towns."

"Mandan towns!" They gazed at each other.

Belzey nodded. "It means we might have big trouble."

"We've got to put out scouts in a hurry," Zack said.

"Already done it," Belzey said. "I've got three young Crows scoutin' north of us. One is Owl's son. They'll warn us."

"Did these strangers see the white women?"

"I put the same question to Gray Elk," Belzey answered. "He was sure they saw the young Fitzhugh gal. He said she came into camp with the squaws, carryin' wood, while the two was here."

"They wouldn't come here in the dead of winter to trade," Zack said. "They were sent to find out if something was here. And they found it."

"We ain't too strong, if it comes to standin' off a big Mandan war party," Belzey said.

Zack was certain that Quinn Spain had located them. During the weeks he had begun to believe Spain had given them up for dead or out of his reach. "The last thing I wanted was to cause trouble for the Crows," he said. "We would not have stayed this long, but the weather pinned us down until lately. I had made up my mind to pull out in a day or two. Now, it may be too late."

"Where would you have gone?" Belzey asked. "Fort Jeanne?"

"In spite of everything, Jeanne thinks I'm mistaken about Quinn Spain," Zack said. "And, above all, about her uncle. She seems to think that this Paul Chalfant can do no wrong. You'd believe he was a saint the way she keeps her faith in him."

"Saints don't pizzen preachers, I tell you now," Belzey said.

"Poison?"

"Angus Macleod wasn't the only one what died mighty sudden at Fort Macleod the morning after he came there with you to see that you got fair treatment," Belzey said. "Two o' them fine deerhounds the engages own at the fort turned up their toes at the same time."

Zack was staring at him. "What are you saying, Belzey?" But a horror was growing in him.

"Angus Macleod was as healthy as you or me," Belzey snorted. "He fell dead as he was eatin' breakfast in the bedroom in the agent's house where Quinn Spain had quartered him. The breakfast was brung to the good man's room on a tray that mornin'. Do you know who brung it? Quinn Spain himself. An' somebody emptied the food from the good man's plate out of the window into the weeds outside the fort before other people were told that Angus Macleod had died of a stroke. Two of the dogs from the deerhound pack happened along an' ate it."

"How do you know this?" Zack demanded.

"Gray Elk. He was at the fort, tradin' off wolf pelts. It was that same time that he saw these two bois brules at the fort. He had slept outside the fort in the brush that night an' saw the dogs eat the stuff an' die before they'd gone a dozen yards. He later saw Jules Lebow sneak out an' bury their carcasses in a swamp along the river. An Indian woman servant told him it was Spain who took the grub to the preacher's room."

The horror grew in Zack. "Why didn't you tell me this before, Belzey? I had told you my suspicions of Spain."

"I jest found it out when I talked to Gray Elk about the two strangers that came here."

"Why would they murder Angus Macleod? He and Paul Chalfant were friends. Angus told me that himself."

"Ain't no way of tellin' what's in another man's mind," Belzey said. "Or in his heart."

Zack drew on a fine new jacket of wolfskin made by Jeanne and Sera and the Crow women. He and Belzey headed for the latter's lodge. Darkness had come. The stars were cold and tiny in a black universe.

In Belzey's lodge the fire burned brightly. Buffalo fleece was broiling. Jeanne had contrived a tiny tallow candle which she lighted on the Yule tree.

She curtsied to them. She was radiant. She and Sera wore dresses which they had made over from what material was available. They had managed to even give this wardrobe a touch of style. Their hair was done fashionably. Sera was a handsome, distinguished woman with a mature sprinkle of gray in her locks. Jeanne was beautiful—stunningly so.

Owl and Floating Leaf entered, wearing ceremonial dress. Other Crows came until the lodge was jammed. Cups of hot rum were passed around.

Belzey unveiled another treasure—a small music box which tinkled out a tune when the handle was turned. The Crows clapped hands to their mouths.

The feasting went on and the Crows would not let Belzey quit on the music box. Zack and Jeanne sat side by side. After a time, as though reluctant to break this mood, she spoke. "What is it to be?"

He eyed her. She smiled wryly. "There's been something on your mind, but you didn't want to spoil the fun. I know what it is. Belzey has told you about the two strangers."

"So you did see them?"

"And they saw me. They were careful to act as though they hadn't noticed me. But they knew."

That clinched it in Zack's mind. If the pair had been wandering traders they would at least have shown curiosity in regard to the presence of a

white woman in the Crow village.

"You and Sera will have to leave here," he said.

She evidently had expected that. "When?"

"Tomorrow. At daybreak. I'll send Belzey with you."

"And you?"

"I'll stay here for a while at least."

"Where will we go?" she asked. "To Fort Jeanne?"

"No," Zack said sharply. "There's another Crow village down in the Pumpkin Butte country. A big village where you'll be safe."

"Why not Fort Jeanne?"

"I have my reasons," Zack said.

"The only way this terrible thing can be straightened out is by me talking to Uncle Paul. Surely you must see that."

"It's best to do it my way," he said.

She did not pursue the subject. "I'll stay here, of course," she said.

"If they come, you may be the one they'll want to kill above all," Zack said.

"I must stay," she said. "You know that."

Zack sat looking at his hands which rested on his knees. "Yes," he said. "I expected you to say that."

She was silent a moment, then said, "I could stay here always. I could be happy here."

If he stayed here with her. He knew that was what she meant. She was afraid of what she might learn if she went to Fort Jeanne, afraid that her own flesh and blood had turned against her and was even trying to bring about her death.

She watched his expression. "You know more than you have told me," she said.

He avoided that bait. He could not bring himself to tell her that Angus Macleod probably had been murdered and that her uncle had been a party to the crime. "What about Sera?" he asked.

"She will stay also, of course. You couldn't drag her away, with Rainbow's baby so near. You'd think that Rainbow was her daughter, the way she's been worrying about her."

Owl began a solemn shuffle dance to the tune from the music box. Other Crows joined in as best they could in the crowded lodge.

Sera's voice finally imperiously put a stop to the merriment. "That's enough. Clear out of here, you drunken men! Scat! Scat, I say!"

Hunts-The-Rainbow's moment had come.

Finally, the village, with the great feast of the white persons' medicine tree over, began to quiet down for the night. Zack rolled up in his robes in Owl's lodge.

Belzey and Owl were asleep. Floating Leaf had remained in Belzey's lodge to help look after Hunts-The-Rainbow. Zack lay awake. Sounds from Belzey's lodge ran across the silence of the night occasionally. Motherhood was not being easy for Hunts-The-Rainbow.

It was past midnight when the sounds reached a climax that brought cold sweat to Zack's forehead. Then he sat up, listening. A thin new wailing came faintly. The screaming of Hunts-The-Rainbow had ended.

He shook the snoring Belzey. "Wake up! You're a father!"

But Belzey only mumbled and rolled over. Zack arose and dressed. He walked to Belzey's lodge. "Is everything all right?" he called.

It was Jeanne who answered. "Come in."

She and Yellow Blossom were washing a new, small brown squawling object.

"A son," she said, fondling the infant. "A hunter of the buffalo. A warrior to fight for his people."

Zack walked nearer. He gathered both the child and Jeanne in his arms and kissed her, gently at first, and then with great demand. Her lips responded fully.

He drew back abruptly. "No!" he said harshly. "This is not for us."

He left her standing there holding the Indian baby, and went back to Owl's lodge where Belzey still lay asleep. But it was a long time before he fell into restless slumber.

He awakened suddenly. A rider was galloping into the village. He heard Crows arousing in other lodges. He was the first one out in the open, rifle in his hand. Frigid dawn was near.

The horseman was Hawk, the son of Owl. He called out in the Crow tongue. "The Mandans! They are coming!"

There was no way of knowing the numbers of the raiders, Hawk said as he leaped from his horse. The attacking party had split. One group was approaching up the Little Buffalo from the east. The other party was coming from the north by way of the creek.

CHAPTER IV

CHRISTMAS morning. Cold daybreak marked out the bleakness of the plains. The snow-bound lodges of the Crows stood silent and apparently asleep as the light strengthened. Thin smoke drifted from the wings. A sound came from Belzey's lodge. It was the mewing-kitten voice of a new-born baby.

This was the only lodge that was occupied. Hunts-The-Rainbow could not be moved.

Zack lay in hiding on the low rocky ridge which overlooked the village. Owl was concealed a few yards to his left and Belzey was at his side to the right.

Hidden among brush and boulders along the ridge were the Crows.

Jeanne was with the women.

She wore the deerskin smock, leggings, moccasins and blanket of a squaw. Zack had requested that she dress herself thus, and keep her head covered so that she could not be easily singled out.

Belzey spoke. "Waugh! This child's half froze fer a drink o' rum."

"You drank the last of it after the party," Zack said. He was silent a moment, then spoke. "Why would a man like Paul Chalfant be a party to the murder of a friend? Why would a man change like that? Jeanne believes in him."

"Maybe the preacher was done in before Chalfant had any say about it," Belzey speculated. "Chalfant was away that night, accordin' to what you told me. Maybe Spain didn't want him to git together with Angus an' talk over old times."

"I've always doubted that Chalfant was really away," Zack said. "I think he was there at the fort all the time, and—"

His voice drifted off. He gazed at Belzey, startled. "That's it!" he exclaimed. "That's it! Why didn't I see this before? It's as plain as day."

Before he could explain, one of the Crows signalled that the foe was in sight. Presently Zack saw the Mandans advancing through the thin brush that flanked the frozen river. There were some 30 of them in sight. The other half of the war party would number about the same, no doubt, but it had not yet appeared from the creek west of the village. The Crows would be outnumbered more than two to one.

Owl motioned to his Crows and they advanced with a rush to the rim of the bluff, rifles and bows ready. Owl lifted a warwhoop. The Mandans halted, gazing up, and Zack could see horror in them as they realized how exposed they were to the blast that was about to strike them.

It came. The distance was no more than a long pistol shot. Guns exploded.

But it was the bows, their twanging harsh in the brittle air, that were taking the heaviest toll.

Battle lust blinded the Crows, even Owl. Thirsty to come to grips with their enemy, they poured down from the ridge and swept upon the surviving Mandans.

"Come back!" Zack shouted. "You are fools!"

They did not heed. The thing Zack had feared now happened. More Mandans appeared, racing from the mouth of the frozen creek just west of the village. The remainder of the raiding party had arrived.

Zack ran raging among the Crows, pointing to the new Mandan force. Up to this time the battle had been fought away from the village, but the new arrivals were racing among the lodges.

"Get back on the ridge!" Zack kept shouting.

He became aware that another voice was lifted, and that Crows around him were pausing and gazing. Jeanne stood in plain sight on the ridge. She had removed the cowl from her head, and dropped the blanket, so that all could see her tawny hair and know that she was not an Indian woman.

"No more fighting!" she was shouting. There was a wild urgency in her that gave her strength and power. Her voice carried. The din of battle tapered off. The bowstrings went silent. The Mandans also were staring.

"No more fighting!" she repeated. She spoke partly in Crow, partly in English and used sign language to get her meaning across. "You can see me, all of you. There has been a terrible mistake. I am J. K. Fitzhugh of the fur company. I am a woman. The company came into my name when my father died. I am a friend of the Mandans. I am the friend of the Crow. Let us put down your arms and we will talk this over."

Zack went scrambling up the ridge. She saw him coming and spoke faster. "I will go to Fort Jeanne with your chiefs, and there we will meet with the bourgeois and . . ."

Zack reached her side. From this elevation he had a clear view of the Mandans who were scattered over the flat and among the Crow lodges.

In the background, Zack saw a man lift a rifle and take aim. A second did the same. They were not Mandans. They wore blankets, but beneath that was the garb of voyageurs.

Zack dove at Jeanne and pitched her bodily flat on the snow. He heard the report of the rifles and the whir of the bullets over the spot where she had been standing.

The battle had resumed with a great burst of screeching and gunfire. Zack arose, shouting to the Crows to join him on the high ground. This time they obeyed, and came racing to this strong position. Their arrows and bullets began to take toll.

The Mandans gave it up suddenly. They turned and raced for the shelter of the creek west of the village.

The sun was rising. A Crow warrior near Zack was strangling, an arrow through his lungs. Owl's son lay dead and his father stood over him, grief-stricken. The bodies of the slain were dark blotches on the frozen land below. Some had been scalped.

Squaws began to lament their dead, the sadness of their mourning unutterably eerie. A new horror drove through Zack. One of the mourners was Yellow Blossom.

Belzey began running and Zack followed. He stepped into the lodge.

Jeanne stood with Sera. Belzey was bending over the pallet on which Hunts-The-Rainbow and their new son lay. Mother and child were dead.

Zack left the village. He trailed the retreating Mandans to the plains and waited there until mid-afternoon to make sure they were not coming back.

It was long past dark when he made his way back to the Crow village. The mourning was still going on.

Zack located Sera amid the turmoil.

"Where is she?" he asked sharply. "Jeanne?"

Sera looked at him, hollow-eyed. "Gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"To Fort Jeanne to talk to Paul. Where else?"

"Not alone?" Zack exclaimed.

"Belzey is with her. They took horses."

"Why didn't you stop her?" Zack groaned.

"She was gone for two hours before I missed her," Sera said.

"They'll kill her," Zack rasped. "There's no such person as Paul Chalfant at the fort."

He raced through the confusion until he found Owl. He explained the situation.

Owl brought one of his best horses and placed the rawhide reins in his hand and gave him a pistol to reinforce the rifle he carried.

In addition, Owl and three Crow warriors, all muffled in blankets and robes, rode up and joined him as he mounted. They were armed with rifles and bows.

"We are going with you, Logan," Owl spoke. "There are many people at the fort. You could not fight them all."

Zack, touched, shook hands with the stalwart Crows. "Not many, I'm sure, will fight for the ones I seek," he said. "But your presence will give me the strength I need."

"We want to find this Quinn Spain and this Paul Chalfant who sent the Mandans to slay our sons," Owl said grimly. "We may be too late. The Tall Pine will send the two you seek to follow the spirit of his son when he meets them."

The Tall Pine was the Crow name for Belzey.

* * *

Belzey, guiding Jeanne, had followed an Indian trail westward along the Little Buffalo, but the Crows, better acquainted with the terrain, saved many miles by striking directly across country, passing over marshy areas that were impassable normally, but were now hard-frozen.

Not long after daybreak they intersected the tracks of the ponies the two were riding. The sign

was at least two hours old. Owl said the fort was still some 30 miles away.

Their horses were feeling the pace, and they rested them briefly and built a fire for warmth and to heat pemmican.

It was toward noon and Zack and the four Crows were riding through a sea of great, snow-covered swells in the plains when they encountered more pony tracks. Three riders had entered the trail which now was a well-used route that headed in the direction of Fort Jeanne. These tracks were a few hours older than the ones made by the mounts of Jeanne and Belzey.

The pursuit seemed hopeless. Jeanne and Belzey still were more than an hour's ride ahead of them. Their own horses were tiring.

However, Jeanne's and Belzey's ponies were nearing the end of their endurance also, and their plodding tracks freshened as the afternoon wore along. It was late when the Crow party emerged from broken hills and came in sight of the frozen Missouri. Zack began to recognize landmarks The fort was nearer at hand than he had realized.

They descended into the shallow course of a tributary stream. The ponies Belzey and Jeanne had been riding stood picketed where they might have a chance to rustle forage.

Zack abandoned his own jaded mount and ran ahead for the sake of greater speed. The Crows followed his example.

He suddenly came into view of the fort which stood on a bluff above the river less than a quarter of a mile away.

Belzey, tall and gaunt-faced, stepped into view from cover as they approached the fort.

"Where's Jeanne?" Zack snapped.

Belzey pointed with his rifle. "Up there, I reckon."

"In the fort?" Zack demanded harshly.

"She run a high blaze on me," Belzey said. "I left her here while I scouted around to try to find a way to git inside. When I come back she was gone. I oughtn't to have let her out'n my sight. She puts a lot o' stock in this uncle of hers. She told me more'n once as we was on our way that she was sure she could straighten things out if she got a chance to talk to Paul Chalfant. That's what she's doin' right now, most likely."

Zack ran toward the fort, followed by the others. They raced through the postern gate into the stockade yard. The trading store, flanked by warehouses and the living-quarters of the engages, occupied the greater part of the enclosure. The agent's house, which was a sizeable log structure, stood alone. Zack ran to it, crossed the small porch and flung open the door, which was unlocked.

A woman servant screeched and cowered against a wall. A door opened into a dining room. Through it, Zack saw Jeanne rising to her feet. She had evidently just been served by the woman.

He reached this door, his rifle raised. Quinn Spain also had been at the table. Spain had seized up a brace of pistols and was standing with them cocked.

Belzey stood at Zack's shoulder. Spain backed away toward an opposite door, keeping the table between them.

Zack spoke to Spain. "Don't move any farther."

Spain maintained his poise. "Miss Fitzhugh has told me a very interesting story," he said. "We can't tell you how happy we are—and I am referring to everyone at this post—to know that she is alive. And her aunt also. We know the keelboat was destroyed. We had taken it for granted that everyone was dead. It was a shocking piece of treachery on the part of the Mandans."

Zack addressed Jeanne. "What does your uncle say?"

She was able to speak, shakily. "I haven't seen Uncle Paul. He's away, visiting some Indian chief."

"I see," Zack said. "The same one he was supposed to have been visiting the night Angus Macleod came here to see him."

He spoke to Spain. "You made a fast trip from the Little Buffalo. You must have pulled in here hours ago."

Spain frowned. "I don't know what you're talking about. The Little Buffalo river? I haven't been near that stream in months."

"How about that scar there by your mouth, Spain?" he said. "It's freshly healed. Perhaps you don't remember me smashing you in the face with a riflestock that night I found you in a Mandan house with a Mandan girl. Those were the same Mandans who wiped out the keelboat, the same ones who killed many of Owl's people yesterday, and also his son."

"Again I tell you I don't know what you're talking about!" Spain exclaimed.

He addressed Owl, who had moved into the doorway back of Zack and with the other three Crows at his heels. "Your son dead, Owl? Surely, you don't believe I had anything to do with it? Miss Fitzhugh was just telling me that Mandans had attacked your village. You're my friend. All of the Crows are my friends."

Belzey Williams spoke. "Angus Macleod was a friend, too."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Spain countered.

Zack moved to the table and pushed Jeanne's plate toward him. "Eat," he said.

Jeanne comprehended. "Surely, you're not saying that Angus Macleod was poisoned?" she cried out, horrified.

Spain laughed loudly.

He lifted a fork and ate from the plate. "Delicious," he said.

"What happened to Paul Chalfant, Spain?" Zack asked.

"Paul? You were just told that. He's visiting—"

"I mean the real Paul Chalfant. Did you murder him also?"

"You're crazy!" Spain shouted.

"You've been milking Fitzhugh Fur for years," Zack said. "You knew they were about to get on to you and that you might lose everything you had stolen and go to prison. You decided that if you could get through this winter, you could make a final haul and pull out in the spring and leave the country. Isn't that the way of it?"

"That is all ridiculous," Spain said.

"J. K. Fitzhugh's face was not the only one that was not known in the mountains," Zack said. "Paul Chalfant, the general manager, had never been to Fort Jeanne either. He managed the company from the New York office. No more than a handful of people in the mountains had ever gone back there and seen him in person. One of these was Angus Macleod. You murdered Angus, knowing that if he ever laid eyes on the fake Paul Chalfant, your goose was cooked."

Zack heard Jeanne draw a deep, shaken sigh. He did not lift his eyes from Spain as he kept talking. "When you learned that J. K. Fitzhugh was on her way to Fort Jeanne you had to wade deeper. It was your neck now. You had to get rid of her and her aunt too, or anyone else on that boat who might know the real Paul Chalfant. That's why you led the Mandans on the keelboat. They probably didn't know it was a Fitzhugh boat. You likely told them it was from some other company that was bad medicine to them. You didn't want any witnesses left alive."

Zack paused a moment, then asked. "Who's in that room back of you, Spain? It's your fake Paul Chalfant, isn't it?"

Spain suddenly darted toward the door. He whirled there, lifted a pistol and fired at Zack. Zack was unable to bring his rifle to bear at that close range. He swerved aside and averted death at least, but he felt the slug tear agonizingly along a rib.

Spain tried to level his second pistol and finish the job. Before he could pull the trigger a rifle bullet smashed through his chest.

At the same instant an arrow sprouted like an evil growth over Spain's heart.

Spain was dead as his body pitched to the floor. Afterwards, in Zack's mind, there was a doubt as to whether it had been the bullet or the arrow that had slain him. Both perhaps. Belzey and Owl had avenged their sons.

Zack plunged ahead through the door into the rear room. A gray-faced, thin-featured man, whom Zack had known as Paul Chalfant at the time he had been beaten with a lash, cowered there.

The man pointed to Spain's body. "I'm his brother," he said hoarsely. "He talked me into taking Paul Chalfant's place."

Jeanne ran to Zack's side. "You're bleeding! You've been shot!"

Zack cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. "In all my life I've never been as alive, as sure that I'm going to live to a ripe old age," he said huskily.

Afterwards, Zack, his wound bandaged, sat propped on pillows in a bedroom at the house of the bourgeois and questioned the man who had posed as Paul Chalfant.

Sidney Spain, which he gave as his real name, at first denied that he had any knowledge of Paul Chalfant's fate.

"You know," Zack said. "Quit lying, or I'll turn you over to the Crows."

Owl and his warriors were present in the crowded room, along with Belzey and engages and clerks of the fort. Sidney Spain looked at the savage-eyed Crows and wilted. He began to talk. "Quinn told me that Paul Chalfant died of cholera aboard a steamboat on the Ohio river which he and Quinn had boarded at Pittsburgh for St. Louis while they were on their way to Fort Jeanne the summer before last. Chalfant was buried at a little settlement on the Kentucky shore, but not under the name of Chalfant. His death had given Quinn the idea of having me take Chalfant's place. I was living at a farmhouse in the brush on the Illinois shore upriver from St. Louis. The furs that Quinn had been smuggling out of Fort Jeanne in cahoots with a couple of keelboat captains, were delivered to me there."

"Are you sure your brother didn't murder Chalfant aboard that steamboat?" Zack demanded.

"I believe Quinn told the truth about Chalfant dying of cholera," the man protested. "It can be proved, I'm sure. Quinn said Chalfant is buried under the name of Jack Smith."

Zack turned the man over to the senior clerk with orders that he be kept locked up and guarded.

"There probably are more rotten apples in the barrel," Zack said to Jeanne, "but the majority of them seem loyal. The tainted ones can be picked out in the course of time. Belzey and Owl will keep an eye on them until I get back on my feet."

A new voice spoke, "Now who would want to talk about rotten apples at a time like this?" And Sera came rustling into the room. Sera had followed them to the fort.

She glared around at Belzey and the staring clerks and the Crows. A jug of rum had been commandeered by the Crows, and was being passed around.

"Don't you rascals know this is a sick room!" she thundered. "Clear out of here, every last one of you. And you too, Belzey Williams. A man of your age should be getting some rest instead of guzzling spirits."

The assembly departed in a hurry, the Crows whooping a little in defiance, just to show that they weren't entirely cowed by a female.

Belzey lingered in the door, and pointed at Sera. "You too, m'am," he said. "Ever hear anybody say that three was a crowd?"

Sera looked at Jeanne and Zack. "Oh!" she gasped. "Oh!"

She went hurrying out with Belzey, carefully closing the door back of her.

Jeanne came to sit on the side of the bed. She gazed around.

"It is a more cheerful place than the Owl's Nest," she said. She looked down at him. "But I will never forget the nest. I want to go back there—often."

He drew her down so that her face was against his. "You will have company," he said.

"That is good," she sighed. "For, surely, I would not go there without the fur thief, that great bear of a man who once lived there and compelled me to fall in love with him."

THE END

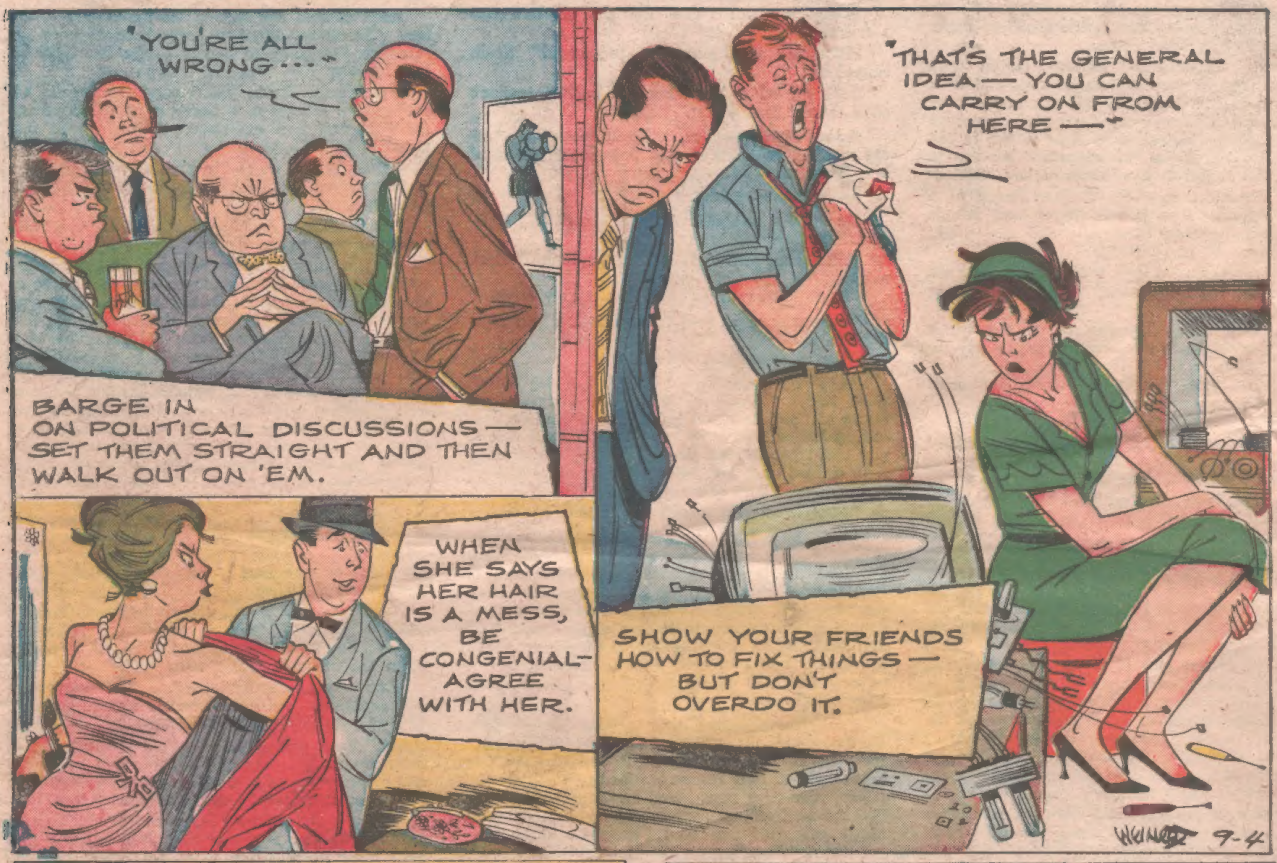
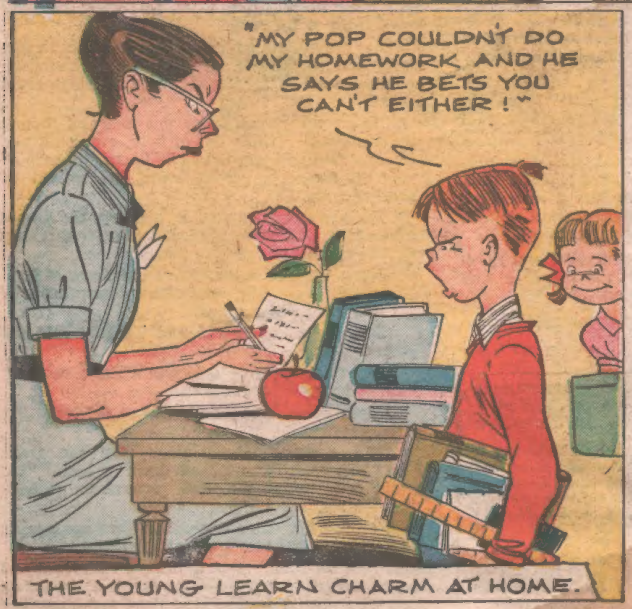
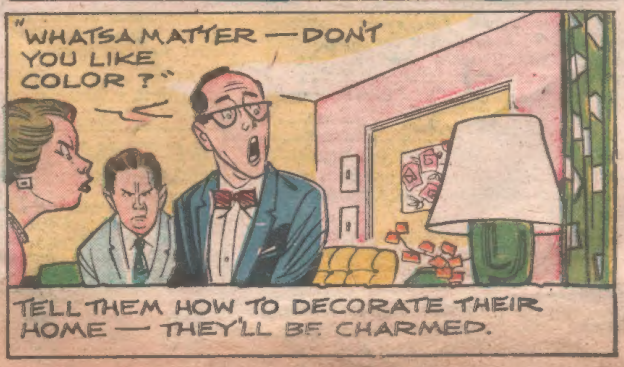
COMING NEXT WEEK!

Julia Farr's world was secure and sheltered—until the week-end her husband Adam was away and she had to deal alone with their son's disappearance. This is the suspense-filled story of how she emerged from her cocoon to cope with a crisis in which one mistake could be fatal!

NO SECOND CHANCES

by Reed Marr

VIGNETTES OF LIFE

Charm

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